

what flies but never lands?

June 2–
September 5
2021

Chicago Cultural Center
78 E Washington St

Ana García Jácome
Max Guy
Cathy Hsiao
Imani Elizabeth Jackson
and S*an D. Henry-Smith
SaraNoa Mark
Hương Ngô
Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel

curated by Minh Nguyen
design by Platform

CURATORIAL NOTE Minh Nguyen

A sect of Middle Ages Christianity believed that God reinvented the world in every moment. In this creationist myth, every increment of time generates the world anew, like a spring petri dish perpetually wiped clean. A cosmogony of constant reset has always stuck with me as a fitting description of the present era's recollective capacity. With colonialism's forced amnesia and capitalism's cult of innovation, time not only feels always restarting but parceled into alienated cells of experience. Capital, as the poet Dionne Brand writes, "steals time by organizing time." As the British empire designed and popularized wristwatches to control its military, the right to one's time—which is to say, the right to one's life—is plundered by the Western hegemonic violence of slavery, incarceration, wage theft, debt, and other forces of extraction.

This exhibition was initially formed through the artists, whose works I learned alongside over these past years in Chicago. Holding their multifarious practices in my mind, I realized that what linked them was a defiance to this condition of constant reset. *what flies but never lands?* showcases these works that, through their own logics and affects, resist the slipstreams of the present. Staged in Chicago Cultural Center's Michigan Avenue Galleries, the exhibition is gently organized into three concepts, one for each room: *swirl*, *light*, and

ground. Both nouns and verbs, these terms offer frameworks for considering how the artworks relate to each other, and how they respond to the broader thematics.

Swirl proposes an imaging of history as embodied by the spiral. Unlike the Western teleological conception of time where the present exists on a linear plot between past and future, the spiral is coiled, repetitive, and dual-directional. Ana García Jácome's installation of a speculative exhibition called *We Protest Against Polio* merges the already-happened with the not-yet. Re-presenting materials she found on polio from the 1950s to 1980s in Mexico's Historical Archive of the Secretariat of Health, Jácome provides a glimpse into a process of historization that is at once specious, random, and ridden with values of the ruling class. (Some of these documents were later debunked as falsified yet remain in the archives.) Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel's *Too Close in Time for the Comfort of Mythmaking* likewise enacts a concentric compression of time. Though its flashy arrangement may strike the viewer as an associative spell, this photographic collage is laser-like in its focus: the exotic birds of South America and the American businessmen who used their enthusiasm for birds as a pretext to insert themselves in the region's economic and cultural development. Photographs from



Hương Ngô, *In the Shadow of the Future* (2014–2019), video still, three-channel video, architectural installation.

a National Geographic spread by Charles Munn III, a biologist who developed a macaw breeding ecotourist enterprise on the land of Tambopata Indigenous people, are placed next to photographs the artist took in natural history museums, of taxidermied birds and Amazonian Indigenous belongings with plumage. These images, as contributing writer Ionit Behar states in her essay "Time: An Indocile Matter," are combined "in a maximalist manner to reanimate and denaturalize them, allowing the viewer to see them anew and to viscerally sense their polarities."

Imani Elizabeth Jackson and S*an D. Henry-Smith's aural-literary installation *What the roots shallowed* compare two different markers of time: trees and folk songs. Playing through wood-paneled speakers, Mose "Clear

Time: An Indocile Matter

Ionit Behar



Stamp for the International Campaign Against Polio, designed by Joana Bielschowsky de Aguirre, Mexico, 1984.

Rock” Platt’s 1939 recording of the song “Black Betty” is interwoven with the lines of a poem on river birches, the Latin name of which translates to black birch. The artists thread a rich association between trees and the anthemic song; the lyrics’ references of drinking river water fill the space as viewers sit under a photographic print of a solitary willow. Given its folk status as a chain gang song sung and passed along by prisoners while laboring, no single origin of the song can be pinpointed. Jackson and Henry-Smith propose a practice of remembrance, rooted in experimental Black ecopoetics, that is simultaneously born out of and divests from a violent colonial project.

Light evokes the relationship between time and technology, namely the promise of technology as a font of modern progress and mastery over nature. The architectural installation in Hương Ngô’s *In the Shadow of the Future* refers to the star-shaped terraced complexes of Ivry-sur-Seine, communal housing structures in one of Paris’s *banlieues rouges* (red suburbs) where Vietnamese refugees fleeing the Vietnam War relocated. Within its frame, three monitors display a video of a cosmonaut loitering in the neighborhood; this character is based on the pilot Phạm Tuân who became the first Asian space traveler in 1980 when he went into orbit as part of the Soviet Intercosmos program. In his essay “Sonic Infidelities,” published on the exhibition website [www.whatflies.link], Justin Phan writes that, “through her remediation of the space and time of the Cold War, Ngô creates conceptual slippages between how we might think about the refugee, migrant, and cosmonaut. In noting their travel, it brings attention to ourselves too as space and time travelers.” The techno-utopian spirit that Ngô’s piece references evocatively contrasts Max Guy’s video *Problem Machine* (*What’s it like to be dead? What’s it like to die?*), a minimal yet disquieting depiction of a nude body enclosed in and flushed by the blue light of a tanning bed. As contributing writer Ana Tuazon puts it in her essay “I Turn My Body Toward the Sun,” “in a way, Guy’s concept is like a joke: a Black man walks into a tanning

salon. *Problem Machine* forces the awareness that, compared to the typically white users of tanning beds, the artist’s proximity to death may fall farther out of his agency before he enters the machine at all.”

Ground considers earthly materials as tools for record-keeping, and the mutability of these materials’ associations throughout history. Responding to the blue chemicals police used to mark demonstrators in the 2019 Hong Kong protests (referred to as “Water Cannon Blue”), Cathy Hsiao’s installation *Mother’s House* 孃家 | *Architecture for Water Cannon Blue* 水砲藍 presents “indigo-objects” that reclaim the cultural and spiritual significance of blue dye. Hsiao counters the mass-produced dye that visualizes crowd control technology with the ancient, ceremonious act of making indigo (which similarly pigments the skin upon contact). If the police hose spouting dye is a form of oppressive drawing, Hsiao asks us how mark-making can be redeemed as a joyful, anti-authoritarian practice. Likewise invested in drawing as a historical endeavor, SaraNoa Mark exhibits *Unknown Hours*, wall pieces of etched clay slabs, and *Carved Conversations*, floor pieces of engraved asphalt chunks. The tender assiduousness with which Mark inscribes the materials, one scratch at a time, starkly contrasts their status as infrastructural waste: lumps of asphalt, primarily used for road construction, that have washed back up on the lakeshore, eroded into rounded stones by the tide. The carved clay sculptures recall multiple timescales: the culmination of labor hours in the artist’s hands, the thousands of years’ endurance of architectural ruins, and even the geologic time of clay itself, which may survive beyond the scope of human memory.

The art historian Pamela Lee observed that out of the 1960s postwar Information Age had emerged a *chronophobic* art that had an “almost obsessive uneasiness with time and its measure.” The antithesis of this fixation, Lee suggested, was *chronophilic* art that was erotically absorbed with time, “a perverse fascination

with its unfolding.” Though the works in this exhibition register an insistent struggle with time, they are not necessarily anxious, gratuitously romantic, or even invested in standard methods of horology. I believe what they inform us is that consciousness of temporality arises not from the ticking metric of a physical clock, but rather from a political, social timekeeping. Our experience of time is deeply informed by others, and it is with others that we stand any chance to overthrow its hegemonic orderings. ◌

“Linear time is a Western invention, time is not linear, it is a marvelous tangle, where, at any moment, points can be selected and solutions invented, without beginning or end.”
—Lina Bo Bardi¹

In the prologue to his 1944 text “Nueva Refutación del Tiempo” (“A New Refutation of Time”), the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges writes that time is “an indocile matter.” He not only refutes linear time but also argues that there is *no such thing as time*. “Time is a delusion,” he writes, “the impartiality and inseparability of one moment of time’s apparent yesterday and another of time’s apparent today are enough to make it disintegrate.”² Borges questions the notion of historical time, or the chronological determination that is imposed on any particular event. “Let us imagine,” he continues, “that, by a not impossible chance, this dream repeats exactly the dream of the master. Having postulated such an identity, we may well ask: Are not those coinciding moments identical? Is not one single repeated term enough to disrupt and confound the history of the world, to reveal that there is no such history?” Just as Borges provokes, the artists in *what flies but never lands?* disrupt dominant forms of communication and knowledge in order to offer glimpses of a non-linear temporality.

Borges’ temporal reconfiguration comes together with the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi’s perspective on time as a “marvelous tangle,” which likewise resonates with the propositions in this exhibition. Together, the artists featured in the room swirl may be likened to one of excavation of fragmentary histories, or regarded as commitments to operating outside of codified canonical culture or master narratives. Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel’s photographic montage, *Too Close in Time For the Comfort of Mythmaking*, assembles images that the artist accumulated over the past several years in his pursuit of tracing how birds became synonymous with Venezuelan (and more broadly, Latin American) exoticism. The images, hung against an entire wall in the gallery, were collected from National Geographic magazines, photographs taken by the artist from the Field Museum in Chicago and the Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as scans of books from the Field Museum’s

bird collection’s library, with particular attention to books that catalogue European and American bird collectors.

One such central figure in Zambrano-Rangel’s research is William Henry Phelps (1875–1965), an American ornithologist and businessman who owned the largest private bird collection in the world. After completing his studies at Harvard University, Phelps settled in Venezuela in 1897; during his stay, he established a media and commerce empire that includes coffee plantations and companies ranging from television and radio networks (Radio Caracas and RCTV) to those that imported automobiles, typewriters, refrigerators, and even introduced baseball. By the late 1920s, Venezuela had become the world’s leading oil exporter, attracting foreign investors that acquired vast territories in the country. The role of ornithology for Phelps “was just a pretext,” as Zambrano-Rangel explains, “in order to insert himself in the country’s economic and cultural development.”



Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel, *The Exotic is Never at Home* (2019), video still, single-channel video.

The way that Zambrano-Rangel arranges the images—both displayed and displaced—recalls the German art historian Aby Warburg’s 1920s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, in which Warburg arranged with an intuitive logic nearly a thousand images from books, magazines, newspapers, and other daily sources to map the “afterlife of antiquity.” A hundred years after Warburg, Zambrano-Rangel’s installation conveys the “afterlife of colonialism.” We see images of taxidermied birds and headdresses from Latin America suspended in museological cases, pointing to the colonial and capitalist influence that nationalist actors like Phelps had on Venezuela. Zambrano-Rangel clarifies that the birds, as colorfully recognizable objects of South America, are “a sort of currency that justify the exploitation and accumulation

of capital that characterizes Venezuela not only as a nation in a post-colonial context, but also in the present, as the protagonist of its tragic development.” Like Warburg, Zambrano-Rangel combines his images in a maximalist manner to reanimate and denaturalize them, allowing the viewer to see them anew and to viscerally sense their polarities.

Displayed on the opposite side of the gallery, Ana García Jácome’s installation *We Protest Against Polio* is a “speculative exhibition”; that is, one that does not present direct historical veracity, but could still exist according to archival narrative. Drawing on real sources from Mexico’s Historical Archive of the Secretariat of Health, Jácome creates a parafictional installation about the infectious disease polio. In 1959, the oral poliovirus vaccine (OPV) was introduced as an anti-epidemic measure in Mexico, seven years after its development by Jonas Salk. Jácome’s installation combines real and fictional materials of this vaccination campaign as if the exhibition was constructed by the Secretariat of Health with a bureaucratic, propagandistic tone. The included materials—newspaper clippings, photographs, objects, medicine vials, and a demonstration banner that reads “Protestamos Contra La Polio” (We Protest Against Polio)—center on Dr. Reinaldo Martínez, a historical figure who deceived the public into believing he was a doctor under the guise of advancing his hoax vaccine cure. Jácome explains that what she found fascinating about Dr. Martínez was that “this ‘magical cure’ he presented reflected the desire for a ‘less disabled’ future, pushed by mainstream institutions and media that portrayed disability as a tragedy.”

Jácome’s installation also includes an “exhibition catalogue” in the voices of both The Secretariat of Health and the artist. First we read a text in the voice of the State, authored as a fictional Secretariat of Health, and at the end of the catalogue, Jácome intervenes with her own voice:

We Protest Against Polio is a speculative exhibition that, by unearthing Martínez’ proposal from the Historical Archive of the Secretariat of Health in Mexico City, turns the spotlight away from polio as the villain to ask questions about how villains are formed and how abnormality



Photograph of Hong Kong police marking protestors with blue dye shot from water cannons. Courtesy of Reuters and Anushree Fadnavis, 2019.



Archive image of children protesting polio, from the Ministry of the Secretariat of Health, 1990.

I Turn My Body Toward the Sun

Ana Tuazon

is defined and represented. It inquires about where the desire for a cure comes from and what lays behind it. The investment in a cure is rooted in an investment in a future and that it will be as familiar as the past. A cure that guarantees the restoration of the body and any physical damage done by a disease to an earlier, healthy, undisturbed stage pushes disability out of the picture.”

With this parafictional exhibition, Jácome both questions the authority of the archive and develops an alternate history from the archived narrative that centers on disability. Her project asks, what does it mean to protest against a disease?

Who is the narrator? Who is writing history? Who is historicizing? These questions are central in both of Zambrano-Rangel and Jácome’s works. Their installations ask us to consider the impossibility of the neutrality of archives, as they are often crafted by non-neutral people and situations. Museums and exhibitions are often guilty of presenting archival materials as the sole truth, and in doing so validate master narratives. As artistic authors of historical condition, Zambrano-Rangel and Jácome problematize the methods of historicizing; in doing so, their works support Borges’ proposition that time is in fact an indocile matter that remains in suspense. ☹

- 1 Marcelo C. Ferraz, *Lina Bo Bardi* (São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo Bardi e Pietro M. Bardi, 1993), 333.
- 2 Jorge Luis Borges, “A New Refutation of Time” in *Labyrinths* (Cambridge: New Directions, Reprint edition 2007), 325.

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I. PROBLEM MACHINE

My skin darkens every summer. Growing up in Oregon, grey overcast winters were matched by clear temperate summers, during which my parents encouraged me to spend time outdoors. Alongside seasonal tan lines, I became accustomed to the way my mother, a white woman from a small town in the Pacific Northwest, and father, an immigrant from the Philippines, would comment on the deepening color of my skin. “Wow, you’re getting so dark!” It surprised them how quickly I browned once the sun emerged. The attention was neither critical nor celebratory—rather, a remark of surprise.

At times, it even catches me off guard. I’ll look down in June and the brown backs of my hands suddenly contrast the pink palms underneath, lines of difference drawn on the side of every finger. I’m reminded of this when watching Max Guy’s video *Problem Machine* (*What’s it like to be dead? What’s it like to die?*), in which the artist, who is Black, undergoes an indoor tanning session. This service exists to help fair-skinned Westerners achieve a “sun-kissed glow”—cancer risk and all—without sun exposure. Meanwhile, in countries like the Philippines, a multi-billion dollar industry around skin-whitening thrives on the parallel desire of Asian people to maintain their proximity to whiteness. Bleaching soaps and creams, chemical peels, and even probiotic “supplements” are popular; one example of the latter, PROBIO-WHITE, promises consumers “whiter skin from within.”

The basic concept behind *Problem Machine* could be read as a joke: a Black man walks into a tanning salon. The very act of indoor tanning as a dark-skinned person seems rife with absurdity, Guy’s ten-minute video evokes less humorous reactions; we can only imagine the potentially awkward preamble to the video that shows only the interior of the ‘sunbed.’ One wonders if Guy was greeted with surprise by the salon employees. The video depicts him lying down, nude, bathed in the harsh blue light of

a machine designed to transform the human body. We see his chest rising and falling as he breathes. Viewing his body in this confined space—both intimate and overexposed—is so unnatural; in a different context it would feel like a violation. The artist darkening his already melanin-rich body becomes a conceptual act in itself, though the viewer receives no visual evidence of this modification. Once the machine emits an audible drone to signal the end of the session, Guy’s skin appears no different. The glowing tubes quickly turn dark, leaving visible only a silhouette of his legs and feet.

Problem Machine points not only to the problem Guy’s body poses for the tanning bed—the machine’s intended efficacy is minimized when there is already an abundance of melanin present in the skin of its user—but also a fallacy within the modern “beauty industry” that produced such a device. Within a globally hegemonic Euroamerican culture that outwardly denounces racial discrimination, skin color modification reveals the degree to which colorism still persists today. The tanning bed, and its counterpart in skin-bleaching products, relies on a metric of beauty driven by the white supremacist inequities that govern labor and enjoyment. Both are designed for an idealized user: a fair-skinned woman who can slip in and out of her skin color as if it’s a cocktail dress. She enters the sunbed in anticipation of her body on display, perhaps at a Caribbean beach resort. Though her tan is



Max Guy, *Problem Machine* (*What’s it like to be dead? What’s it like to die?*) (2017), video still, single-channel video.

marketed as a “healthy glow,” simulating something as powerful as the sun actually comes at a serious risk of developing cancer, and Guy’s reference to death in the title of the piece points to this absurdity.

Problem Machine forces the awareness that, compared to the typically white users of tanning beds, the artist’s proximity to death may fall farther out of his agency before he enters the machine at all. This ominous footage suggests that all it can offer is to take him closer.

II. CARVED CONVERSATIONS

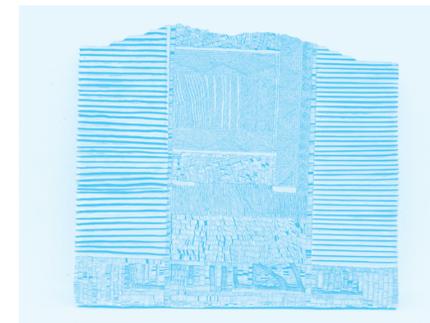
The beginning of history starts as a dry act of receipt keeping and turns into a very complex literary form.

SaraNoa Mark shared this thought in a reflection on *Carved Conversations*, an installation of etched asphalt stones they gathered on the beach at Chicago’s Promontory Point. The thought stays in my mind. Human beings evolved the tool of language mysteriously, but the concept of “keeping score” has certainly been around from the start. Reading about the etymology of “score,” I find it can mean both a “mark, notch, incision; a rift in rock,” as well as the number twenty. The term originates from when early shepherds used sticks to count sheep: instead of cutting a notch for each animal, cuts were made to indicate the larger, but still perceptively manageable, amount of twenty sheep. This practice of scoring sticks denoted numerical values, but Mark’s marks—incisions slowly and methodically carved into stone—form letters, words, statements, and whole conversations. This act of recording, too, becomes a signification of value, reflecting the meaning of those dialogues across the stones, and the place where they occur.

In this time I was compelled to collect the asphalt. I made around 11 trips dragging bubby carts full of rocks from the beach up to my 4th floor walk up apartment. Slightly absurd, but I need to live with objects before I can work with them. I knew I wanted to carve text into them and spent a long time hunting for the right text.

Like the steel boxes encasing the asphalt stones of *Carved Conversations*, Mark locates Promontory Point as a container of sorts, for relational possibility. In the summer of 2020, Mark became part of an informal community that gathered on the southern shore of the Point, some of whom made a habit of remaining at the lake from morning until after dusk, moving in a rhythm between the water and the shoreline rocks. The artist considers *Carved Conversations* “a collaboration between myself, the lake, and the community,” and a key figure within this exchange is DD Clionsky, a community organizer and lifelong resident of Hyde Park who Mark befriended at the Point. Clionsky wished to preserve the spirit of communion that had been created

there over the pandemic summer, when the already tight-knit group became even more closely bonded. Around the same time that Mark began gathering rocks, Clionsky started tape-recording her conversations with other lake regulars. When Mark was granted permission to use these transcripts in *Carved Conversations*, two different practices of collecting material merged.



SaraNoa Mark, *Unknown Hours* (2021), carved clay.

Ömür Harmansab said something like, the amount of asphalt in the world is so massive on the earth’s surface we begin to speak about them as strata, as new geological layers.

Carved Conversations finds resonance with Cecilia Vicuña’s “Arte Precario,” the artist and poet’s name for a ritualistic practice she began in the 1960s. Using only found objects and debris, Vicuña created delicate assemblages on the beach in Concón, Chile, then let them wash away with the waves of the Pacific Ocean. Mark’s material arrives with the waves of Lake Michigan: heavy chunks of asphalt, their edges smoothed after an unlikely life underwater. As a collaboration between both human and non-human actors, the work encapsulates an anthropogenic ecology of time and place, emerging from the conditions of what cultural historian T.J. Demos names the “capitalocene.” Like Vicuña, Mark works with debris that has been consumed by time, its original purpose now obsolete, resembling only a fragment

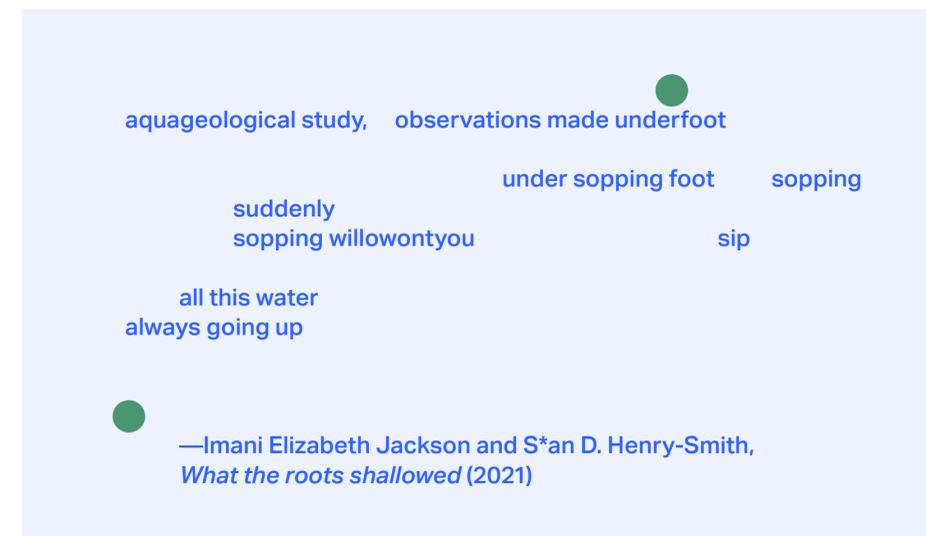
of its earlier self. But this kind of trash can’t be washed away—in fact, the asphalt asserts its staying power by determinedly returning to the land. Mark responds to the permanence of this material with their own slow carving, a ritual practice that transforms the stones’ status as industrial refuse.

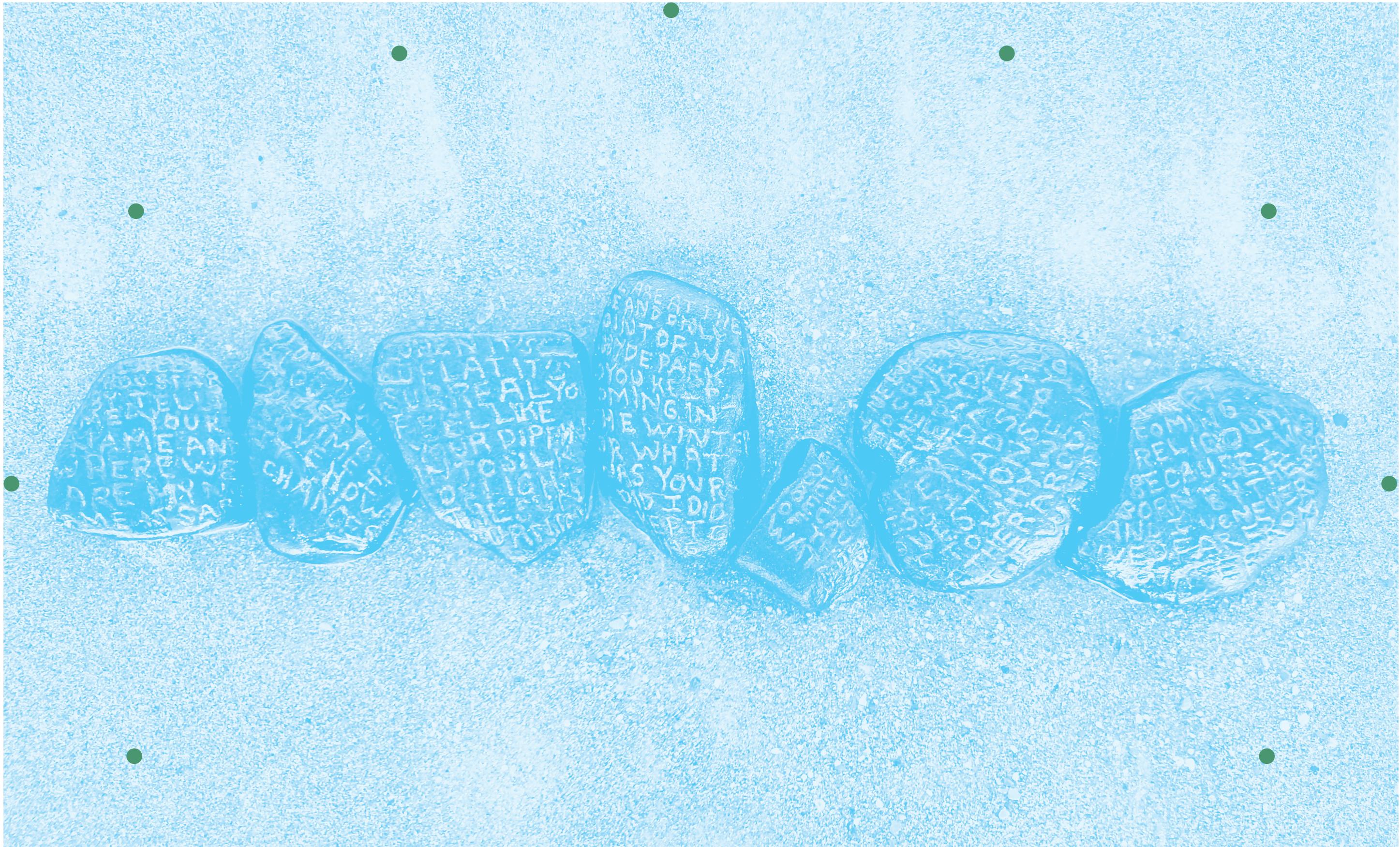
Since I’ve lived in this city I have been interested in the way the water is constantly sorting and organizing materials.

Like rocks washed up onto the beach, the people of the Point became organized by their love for Lake Michigan. As sun and water structured their days, it also began to define a way of relating that diverged from the dominant order of the moment, where we spent many pandemic summer days not in the sun, but in front of a screen. “Was that online talk recorded?”, we would ask each other. The response was usually “yes,” and so we’re left with endless hours of recordings, accessible in an instant. Who will care about our Zoom panels in a century’s time? Will anyone even be around to witness these histories? Both painstakingly crafted and barely legible as texts, the scored rocks of *Carved Conversations* offer a poignant answer to this troubling reality: the impulse to preserve something of great personal value may ultimately be in vain. But maybe it doesn’t matter—all we can do is try. ☹

*Italics denote words by SaraNoa Mark

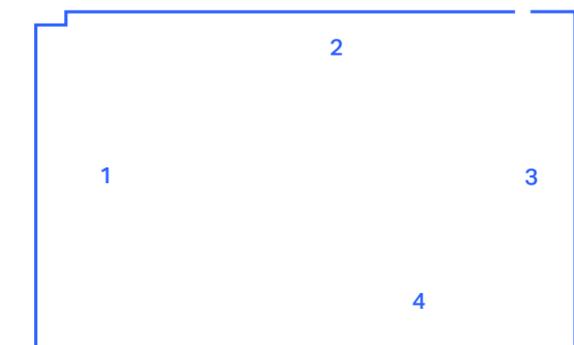
Ana Tuazon is an independent writer and curator based in Brooklyn.





SaraNoa Mark, *Carved Conversations* (2020), carved asphalt gathered from Promontory Point.

To learn more about each artist, please visit www.whatflies.link



swirl

light

ground

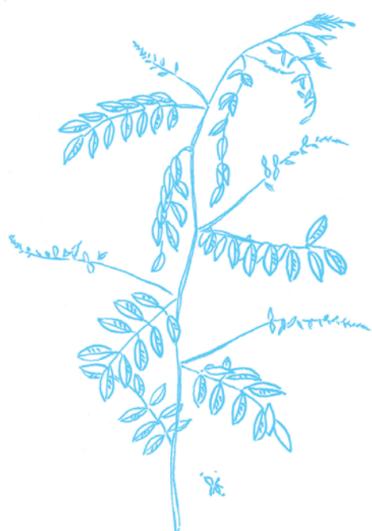
- 1 Ana García Jácome
We Protest Against Polio: A Speculative Exhibition (2019–2021), installation, *Protestamos Contra La Polio* banner, *Poliomielitis en México, 1950s–1980s* display table, exhibition catalogue, Poliorzima PX-24 glass vial.

- 5 Max Guy
Notes on Time Control (2021), archival pigment prints on phototec.
- 6 Max Guy
Problem Machine (What's it like to be dead? What's it like to die?) (2017), single-channel video, monitor.

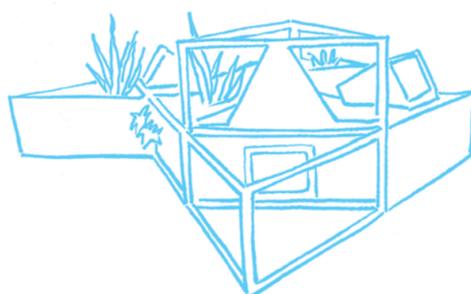
- 8 Cathy Hsiao
Mother's House 孃家 | Architecture for Water Cannon Blue 水砲藍 (2020–2021), installation, sound, Ultracal, Hydrocal, cement, indigo dye, avocado dye, sumi ink, mica, drywall mesh, aluminum lath, UV ecopoxy, Lascaux UV matt.

- 9 SaraNoa Mark
Unknown Hours (2021), carved clay.

- 10 SaraNoa Mark
Carved Conversations (2020), carved asphalt gathered from Promontory Point.



Indigo plant



- 7 Hương Ngô
In the Shadow of the Future (2014–2019), architectural installation, three-channel digital video, color, sound, hypertufa, plants (invasive and non-invasive), reinforced concrete. In collaboration with l'Union des Jeunes Vietnamiens de France (UJVF) and l'Union Générale des Vietnamiens de France (UGVF).



- 2 Imani Elizabeth Jackson and S*an D. Henry-Smith
What the roots shallowed (2021), installation, sound, lecterns, stools, speakers, *What the roots shallowed* publications, photographic print.
- 3 Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel,
Too Close in Time for the Comfort of Mythmaking (2019–2021), photographic installation.
- 4 Jacobo Zambrano-Rangel,
The Exotic is Never At Home (2019), single-channel video, color, sound, monitor. In collaboration with ornithologist Natalia Piland.