

MEANING BELONGS TO PEOPLE

By “modernity” I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.

Charles Baudelaire¹

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects—but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change.

Zygmunt Bauman²

When Charles Baudelaire famously coined the term “modernity,” could he have foreseen that this new world of transitions, ephemerality, and ruptures would not only define an age, but also presage its acceleration? Theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman maintain that the contemporary era is just a continuation of modernity—a radical state of late modernity—with an increased circulation of information, goods, money, images, travelers, and immigrants, as well as a spiraling global hypermobility. If alive today, Monsieur G.—Baudelaire’s celebrated street-wandering painter—would be a heightened form of observer, an active member of the geographically fluid whose practice was both created from and a response to our current state. Oscar Murillo is such an artist. His multifaceted practice includes painting, sculpture, installation, video, and performance. Murillo’s method of making, use of materials, and approach to form intertwine permanence and impermanence, mobility and stagnation, personal and general, local and global, and labor and leisure. Everything is in flux—even when working with the venerable medium of paint. Nothing is polished or decidedly finished.

Murillo’s practice is one of active displacement and hybridization, constantly collapsing distinctions. Even the physical locations in which he makes work continually shift, from his longtime studio in London to in situ installations where he absorbs, sources, and uses what he finds around him to feed into the work. In addition to these finite spaces, transit itself presents a productive environment for the artist. On international flights he has created many drawings—what he calls mark makings—on paper and cloth. He often compiles these into artist’s books or single works titled with the number of the flight on which they were made. Not only do airplanes offer countless meditative hours, the spaces people travel between and the physical body in transit provide an acute reminder of perpetual global exchange, something that underpins both form and content in Murillo’s practice.

As the artist states, his work revolves around “cultural re-contextualization or cultural evaluation,”³ how “cultures collide.”⁴ For Murillo, it takes many forms and elicits many

actions. Words, activities, food, flight patterns, people, family, and community structures are all used to explore the complex cross-fertilization of cultural material. In so doing he adheres to Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of the “altermodern”: a modernity reconfigured for an age of globalization, which has, in turn, produced a new contemporary cultural aesthetic. “[E]lements belonging to a local visual or philosophical culture are transferred from a traditional universe in which they are strictly codified and fixed to one in which they are set in motion and placed beneath the gaze of a critical reading.”⁵

It is easy to connect Murillo’s interest in this form of exchange with his own personal narrative. Of Afro-Colombian descent, he immigrated to London with his family at the age of eleven. In his early years as a practicing artist, he worked as a receptionist at a yoga studio and then as a cleaner in a commercial skyscraper, his colleagues mainly South American. The irony of the workers cleaning on the twenty-eighth floor with soaring views of London was not lost on Murillo. Engaging with his personal experience of displacement allows him to explore a more universal reality, one held in common with a wider critical discourse on postcolonialism, globalization, and the self-reflexive role of the international contemporary artist. These concepts have been investigated by such curators as Okwui Enwezor, most notably in Documenta 11 (2002). Art historian Ana María Guasch used Enwezor’s exhibition to explore “a type of artist who is both involved in the consequences of globalization and committed to the necessary process of internationalization.” She adds: “(f)ollowing Documenta 11, it appeared that the art world was basically focusing on two major issues: first, the new geographical routes that seemed closely to follow the new concepts instated by Immanuel Wallerstein in his book, *Geopolitics and Geoculture* and, second, questions regarding migration, culture and identity.”⁶ Like many contemporary artists, Murillo endeavors to comprehend a hypermobile world of people, things, and ideas—but also how the concept of the artist and the art market itself is a product and contributor.

Perhaps the most direct action Murillo took in order to understand his place within this network is his contribution to the 20th Biennale of Sydney in 2016. The piece was never realized as on the plane over to install the work, Murillo destroyed his passport. Upon landing he was detained for two days before being deported. While the act was not premeditated, it was a profound response to the Biennale’s thesis and title: *The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed*. The passport is a literal identity. Depending on nationality, it offers either privileges or restrictions with respect to movement. For some, it is a reminder of physical and economic limitations. Murillo explains:

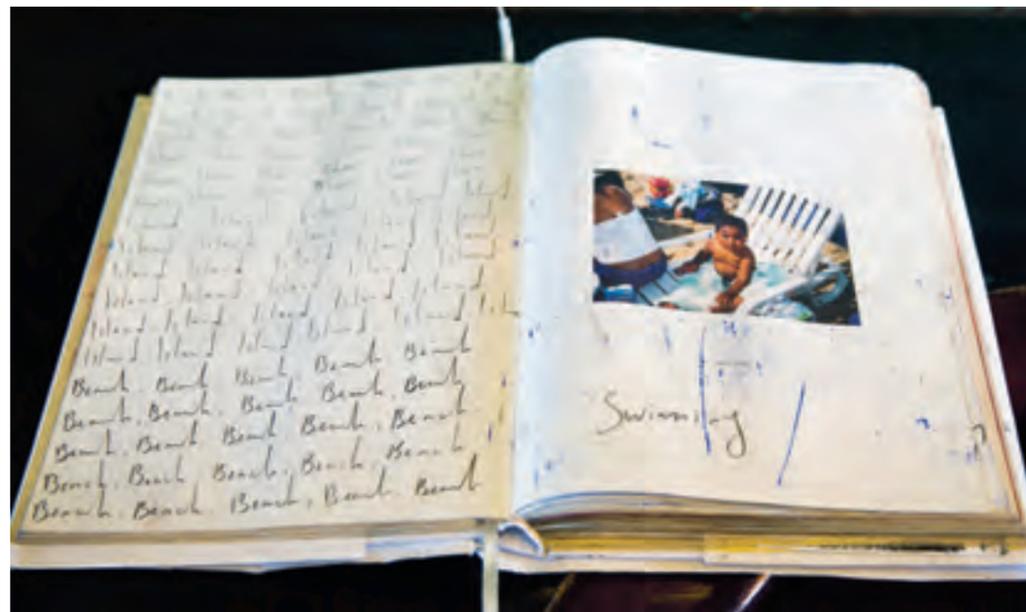
The act could now be hijacked to represent the world today, a prophecy to what's happening in the States, for example, but of course it wasn't—for me it was far more personal. In the 1990s, when family members and friends left Colombia—due to economic migration and dissatisfaction—some of them would destroy their passports on the plane, because on arrival this could help them avoid deportation, they stripped themselves of identity.⁷

and artistic outcome of his familial bonds: “they—They—are really the most important source material for me, culturally. This reflection has almost nothing to do with art, or to do with being an artist, but has a profound connection with me as an individual.”⁸

Murillo's family is a constant within his work. Though not often the direct subject, his family always circle his practice: they are present, woven into it, be it working in the studio with him or at opening parties and events, cooking or initiating salsa dancing. His family is instrumental to projects such as *Frequencies* (2013–ongoing; fig. 2), which they now manage and maintain. Begun in 2013, the project was conceived by Murillo with his parents and political scientist Clara Dublanc. It involves temporarily attaching small canvases to classroom desks in schools across the globe. In line with Murillo's own painting process, the canvases register and collect the marks of daily use. Some are intentional, with the children drawing, writing, and recording hopes, problems, and experiences; and some are unintentional, with the stains, grease, dust, and general use inscribed on the canvases. Through the children's expression, the project has insofar mapped cultural and social differences and similarities in over thirty countries. It has surfaced in Murillo's work in various guises: canvases were presented as part of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015; they are collected in an artist's book; and an active website charts all the schools, canvases, and participants.

The fluidity with which Murillo brings the personal into a broader dialogue and practice is a perennial characteristic of his work. His 2013 exhibition at South London Gallery,

What was presented in Sydney instead resonated with his personal experience of community, migration, and social mobility. Murillo arranged for a copy of *THEM.* (2015–ongoing; fig. 1), an artist's book project, to be installed in the ticket office of a section of the Biennale called *Embassy of Transition*. The exhibition focused on cycles of life, death, and rites of passage. It took place in a former funeral station built in the nineteenth century, a stop for trains transporting coffins and mourners to and from a local cemetery. The book itself documents the lives of Murillo's friends and family in Colombia and the United Kingdom in photographs from the 1970s to 2000, along with a text written by his father on emigrating from Colombia to London. Since 2015, the artist has taken copies of these books on flights. As he travels he draws in them, using carbon paper so that the traces linger on top of one another. These marks made in transit find a parallel in Murillo's preface; of his family pictures he writes: “a lot of this happened at a time when we couldn't travel. As migrants in this country, we couldn't really leave the country: we had limited documentation—or, sometimes, no documentation.” The book is both a personal source



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1 *THEM.*, 2015–ongoing. Installation view, *The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed*, 20th Biennale of Sydney, Mortuary Station, 2016

2 *Frequencies (an archive, yet possibilities)*, 2013–ongoing. Installation view, *All the World's Futures*, 56th Venice Biennale, Central Pavilion, 2015

if I was to draw a line, this journey started approximately 400km north of the equator (fig. 3, pp.11–19) hinged on the personal and the universal: “I wanted to allude to new networks of exchange and am using myself as model for this, as I am a product of it.” The title, referencing his native Colombia, is “a comment on how abstract, decentralized, and increasingly networked the world has become.”⁹ Murillo moved his studio to the gallery. He filled it with stacks of loose, moveable stitched canvases, drawings, copper shelving, and balls of ground corn, the latter resulting in an installation alive with odors and flies. This activation was reciprocated in canvas lining the floor collecting dust and visitors' footprints, mimicking the studio environment. This idea to record use was also manifest in the copper sheet tables, copper being a material that records touch. These were originally installed as flooring (like his canvas) in an exhibition at Carlos/Ishikawa in London. There, they indexed and provided a visual record of action in the gallery. Further marks, scuffs, and abrasions accumulated in the South London Gallery iteration.

A video filmed in Murillo's hometown, La Paila, Colombia, follows a resident selling lottery tickets (pp.18–19). The activity was physically mirrored in the exhibition, in which visitors could buy lottery tickets painted by Murillo. An “equator” line ran along a wall of the gallery, made of cardboard, drawings, and collected images including commercial packaging of products like Vita Coco Coconut Water, Cerveza Poker, and Pride vegetable cooking oil. Products, symbols, and languages are, for Murillo, tools with which to explore the complex global network of exchange. “Burrito,” “Yoga,” “Mango,” “Coconut Water,” “Work,” “Milk,”

“Champagne”—are all isolated words that have appeared in Murillo's early paintings (fig. 4), with emphasis on their inherent social and cultural displacement. Coconut water, for example, is a popular, cheap local beverage in tropical countries. In the West it has become a signifier for a healthy privileged lifestyle. In these paintings, Murillo often folds the canvases while they are wet, so the words are mirrored, faded, and read backwards.

From paintings to installations, Murillo's play with radical synthesis is vital to his practice. It relates to an artistic tradition developed in the twentieth century that is tied to an increasingly collaged urban experience, from street billboards to newspapers. Susan Sontag defines it as the “collage principle.”¹⁰ He paints in sections on the floor of his studio, often leaving the canvases to gather dust, dirt, stains, and footprints, which then form part of the final work, revealing a contemplation of time and accumulation. Some are placed on oil-saturated cotton pads with the artist vigorously moving a broom across the work in progress to transfer the paint to the canvas, a type of monoprinting or carbon paper transfer. While earlier works incorporated painted words and numbers, in recent years he screenprints canvases with ephemera collected on his travels: the backs of playing cards, Jamaican two-dollar bills, a marching band, etc. These go through the same process as all of his paintings: cut into sections, marked, and crudely sewn together to create new combinations. The patchwork canvases are collages of images and interventions. As with all collage and the provisional relationships it allows, Murillo's paintings push and pull. Attention and connotations twist in



- 3 Installation view, *if I was to draw a line, this journey started approximately 400km north of the equator*, South London Gallery, London, 2013
- 4 Murillo during a 2012 residency at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami
- 5 Installation view, *A Mercantile Novel*, David Zwirner, New York, 2014

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divergent directions across both space and time. This relates, once again, to the accelerating fluidity in our contemporary period that adheres to philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky's notion of the "culture-world": the swamp of images, productions, and information that diffuses borders, such as that between high and low culture, the commercial and noncommercial cultural sphere: "In hypermodern times, culture has become a world whose circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere."¹¹

Even when Murillo's work feels completely unified, there is often an underlying fragmentation, explored through material and its context. The artist's beautiful wood and metal window-like sculptures, *Fragments from a now bastard territory* (1991–2016), have been shown in various exhibitions including *Dis Place*, his solo exhibition at YARAT Contemporary Art Space in Baku, Azerbaijan (2016–2017; pp. 242–245). Working with local artisans, Murillo created a series of large-scale works—referencing the technique of medieval stained glass still practiced in Azerbaijan—from discarded sheets of metal salvaged from silk and cotton factories in Sheki. This region was once a major trading post along the Silk Road. It subsequently collapsed during the post-Soviet privatization of factories, resulting in the disenfranchisement of workers and the subsequent displacement of communities.

Murillo calls his site-specific live-works events not performances, as they are neither orchestrated nor choreographed.¹² As with his other work, they play with the transference and translation of displacement and the outcome of juxtapositions. Several of his live exhibitions have focused on displacement in relation to production, work, and trade. His interest not only relates to a wider discourse, it is also intensely personal, making analogies between industrial and artistic production. He explains: "this idea of labor and work is at the heart of my practice."¹³ That entanglement is directly present in *To the Moon via the Beach* (2012), a group exhibition in a sand-filled amphitheater in Arles. Murillo's contribution, *Work just happens*, centered on a series of actions: the artist distributed free coconut water, built sand sculptures, played volleyball, skipped to 1980s Mexican pop, and performed a ninety-minute yoga workout in the afternoon heat.

Attempts to understand artistic practice through action and labor are present throughout his process, including his laborious approach to painting, of which he says, "paintings are by-products of being in the studio and making work."¹⁴ Marking, dyeing, cutting, and stitching canvas comprise the physical activity needed to reflect on the notion of *work*, its place and displacement in the world. He has also examined the notion of work through



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the labor of others. For *A Mercantile Novel* (2014; fig. 5, pp. 67–77), Murillo's first show at David Zwirner in New York, the city of (art) commerce and exchange, he installed an operational chocolate factory based on one his family worked at in La Paila. The artist and the gallery went through the trying process of obtaining visas for thirteen Colombian workers to run the factory in New York, producing chocolates for the visitors. For Performa 15, Murillo's project *Lucky dip* (2015; fig. 6) was installed in Manhattan's Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House; the artist juxtaposed contemporary and historical notions of trade, and played on the relationship between production and artistic creation. The project consisted of participants grinding "Mighty White" (a South African corn) into small packages, along with the singing of a Spanish ballad, readings on the characteristics of the cries of London market traders from the fourteenth century, and a text documenting the export of food from the Americas.

Food is another constant in Murillo's work. From his family cooking Colombian dishes at openings to references to it in his paintings or installations, the topic not only charts trade and global movement, but also carries within it culture. Food is integral to forming identities and memories. It is a common ground that defines communities and travels with them. Food is synonymous with work, from its production to consumption, but equally with work's antithesis: leisure. What people do when they are not working and what form that takes in various cultures and situations is another way Murillo investigates social structures. His exhibition *We Don't Work Sundays* at Marian Goodman



6 Installation views, *Lucky dip*, Performa 15, Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, New York, 2015

7 *animals die from eating too much—yoga*, Hotel gallery, London, 2011



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Gallery, Paris (2014; pp.91–97) centered on the labor invested in nonwork. His point of departure was La Feria de Cali, an annual Colombian festival of carnival parades, athletic events, and salsa marathons. Residents spend months preparing, essentially working to play. Collective celebration is also the subject of Murillo's hypnotic 76-minute video *meet me! Mr. Superman* (2013–2015; pp.164–167), featured in his 2015 show at David Zwirner, London. Filmed on New Year's Day in La Paila, it shows streets bursting with scenes of the ritual of togetherness: people drinking, eating, dancing, and talking. The documentary style is voyeuristic. One has the feeling of watching a community just out of reach, perhaps circling the artist's own sense of displaced identity among the crowd. After all, leisure and ritual are interwoven with feelings of belonging to a community, place, and culture.

Murillo's planned events also take less formal or structured forms in exploring displacement and polarities through acts of leisure and in social situations: a trip to Kew Gardens in the suburbs of London with a community of North-London Somali (*Next/Episodes*, Kingsgate Gallery, 2010); gallery goers invited to eat Colombian food and play bingo, winning prizes related to the 2011 London riots (*animals die from eating too much—bingo!*, Carlos/Ishikawa, 2011); and young women performing yoga—an ancient religious philosophy turned Western staple of well-being—before a gallery audience (*animals die from eating too much—yoga*, Hotel gallery, 2011; fig. 7). For the latter two events, Murillo reused elements such as bingo cards as posters, tables as yoga mats, establishing a method of recycling and reforming that would become typical of his practice. At the Serpentine Galleries, Murillo organized *The Cleaners' Late Summer Party with COMME des GARÇONS* (2012), where he invited his Latin-American friends and family, many of whom were cleaners, to a dance party. Music was played, traditional home-cooked Colombian food was served along with champagne and pastries from a local French bakery, and dance competitions and raffles were held. Winners received Comme des Garçons merchandise, which Murillo had purchased with a voucher from a previous collaboration with the brand.

From the party to the factory, live events allow Murillo to explore a personal history and the universal reality of global fluidity through food, culture, trade, work, and leisure. His events are specifically characterized by the way they bring art closer to life—the intangible experiences of dancing, eating, working, exercise, and togetherness. In playing with the distinctions between performance and realness, Murillo's events are part of a larger art-historical tradition and discourse, from Dadaism to the recent rise of community-based art.



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This takes form in the social dimension of participation, which as art historian Claire Bishop describes, “collapse[s] the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception.”¹⁵ At the Serpentine, for example, as Hans Ulrich Obrist noted, “some people thought it was a party, some people thought it was a performance.”¹⁶ Depending on your own position, hierarchies were either dissolved or awkwardly present, highlighting the complexities of cultural juxtapositions and social assimilation.

These slippages, which carry a pervading sense of uncertainty and an awareness of change, linger in Murillo's work—in the process (with the unconscious mark making by the artist and the visitors), his throwing of fake birthday parties as live events, and even his exhibition titles. For his 2015 installation at Centro Cultural Daoiz y Velarde in Madrid, the title played on different translations of the word *marcha*: in Colombia it means march or protest, and in Spain dance or party, highlighting the intricacies of displacement within language.

In recent exhibitions Murillo has worked with loose, hanging, or folded black patchwork canvas, so drenched

in paint one can sometimes smell dye in the air. Murillo attributes these black works to a series of experiences that unfolded on a midnight flight from Tel Aviv to Baku. On boarding the plane, he discovered there was a dead body in the plane's hold. With increased self-awareness and sensitivity, he focused on the plane's movements, including the sharp right-hand turn it made to avoid flying over Syria. At the moment the plane turned, Murillo observed the blackness of the abstract landscape below.

These canvases first appeared in his 2015 exhibition at Museo de Arte de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. They have subsequently been suspended in the entrance to the Central Pavilion at the Giardini at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015) and from lines between trees in the 5th Anyang Public Art Project, Anyang, South Korea (2016). They have been installed with steel, morgue table-like structures at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin (2015); David Zwirner, London (2015); 6th Marrakech Biennale (2016); David Zwirner, New York (2016); and YARAT Contemporary Art Space in Baku, Azerbaijan (2016–2017). Most recently, at Sharjah Biennial 13 (2017) in United Arab Emirates, his installation *Condiciones aún por titular* was presented in the courtyard of Bait Al Serkal (pp. 269–275). Murillo removed parts of the existing polished floor to expose the earth underneath, digging trenches that he lined with paintings, and planting two small trees. Balls of corn sat on metal structures covered with hanging and folded black canvases. It could have been a temporary shelter or excavation site, and it is this dichotomy that unites his recent black painting exhibitions. Each installation evokes a scene of entropy: steel structures become beds and morgue tables; the canvas becomes seemingly used clothes. The spaces feel both functional (where people rest or work) and abandoned—they evidence both construction and destruction.

Murillo's quiet but apt video of a spinning top always about to fall, installed in Baku (p. 242), perhaps best captures this uncertain state. It echoes Bauman's liquid modernity, in which, "change is the *only* permanence, and uncertainty the *only* certainty."¹⁷ On the one hand, Murillo has left these uncertain spaces ambiguous and open to interpretation. Yet, in considering his work one can easily draw on Giorgio Agamben's spatial theory of power, in view of the contemporary camp (an aesthetic apparent in Murillo's recent exhibitions). For Agamben, the camps have become "the fourth, inseparable element that has now added itself to—and so broken—the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land." Perhaps these paradoxical installations are a simple reminder of our world's pervading and growing "dislocated localization."¹⁸

From the floor paintings to the built environments, and through the symbiotic relationship between material and form, Murillo plays with and presents the entanglements found in social, geographical, historical, and economical narratives of place and displacement. His work, while highly personal, is applicable to a broad global context, which through the combining of various cultural signifiers highlights a perpetual fluidity and exchange. However, from the artist's own mark making in transit, to his family's involvement in his work or the communities with which he collaborates, the individual, or the body, is at the heart of this context. Perhaps for Murillo, this is because he relies on the meaning of things—Colombian baked goods, carnivals, words—traveling with, transforming, and being made relevant by people. Murillo's practice reminds us that all material is embedded with and assigned an ever-changing significance by its users, and the periods and contexts in which they live. For, as Robert Rauschenberg once aptly stated, "Any material has its content and its independence from meaning. Meaning belongs to people."¹⁹

- 1 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 13.
- 2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2012), p. 7.
- 3 Beatrix Ruf, "Working to Work," *Flash Art* (October 2013), p. 65.
- 4 Louisa Buck, "Where life meets art: Oscar Murillo at the South London Gallery," *The Daily Telegraph* (October 11, 2013), www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/art/9768/where-life-meets-art-oscar-murillo-at-the-south-london-gallery.html.
- 5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009), p. 140.
- 6 Ana María Guasch, "Globalization and Contemporary Art," *Third Text* (2013), <http://thirdtext.com/contentcurator.net/globalization-and-contemporary-art>.
- 7 Author in conversation with the artist (unpublished), London, April 3, 2017.
- 8 Oscar Murillo, *THEM.*, 2015–ongoing. Edited and introduced by Oscar Murillo, essay by Belisario Caicedo Florez. Clothbound artist's book of inkjet prints and original drawings on paper.
- 9 Julie Solovyeva, "500 Words: Oscar Murillo," *Artforum* (October 2013), www.artforum.com/words/id=43320.
- 10 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Group, 1961), p. 270.
- 11 Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *La Culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), p. 8.
- 12 Cesar Garcia, "Oscar Murillo: Au Septième Jour," *L'Officiel* (March 2014), p. 237.
- 13 Juan Roselione-Valadez, ed., "Hans Ulrich Obrist Interview with Oscar Murillo," *Oscar Murillo: work* (Miami: Rubell Family Collection, 2012), p. 50.
- 14 Legacy Russell, "Oscar Murillo," *BOMB* (Winter 2013), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6921/oscar-murillo>.
- 15 Claire Bishop, "Viewers of Production," in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2006), p. 10.
- 16 Juan Roselione-Valadez, op. cit., p. 55.
- 17 Zygmunt Bauman, op. cit.
- 18 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 175–176.
- 19 William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 23.