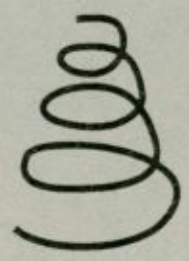
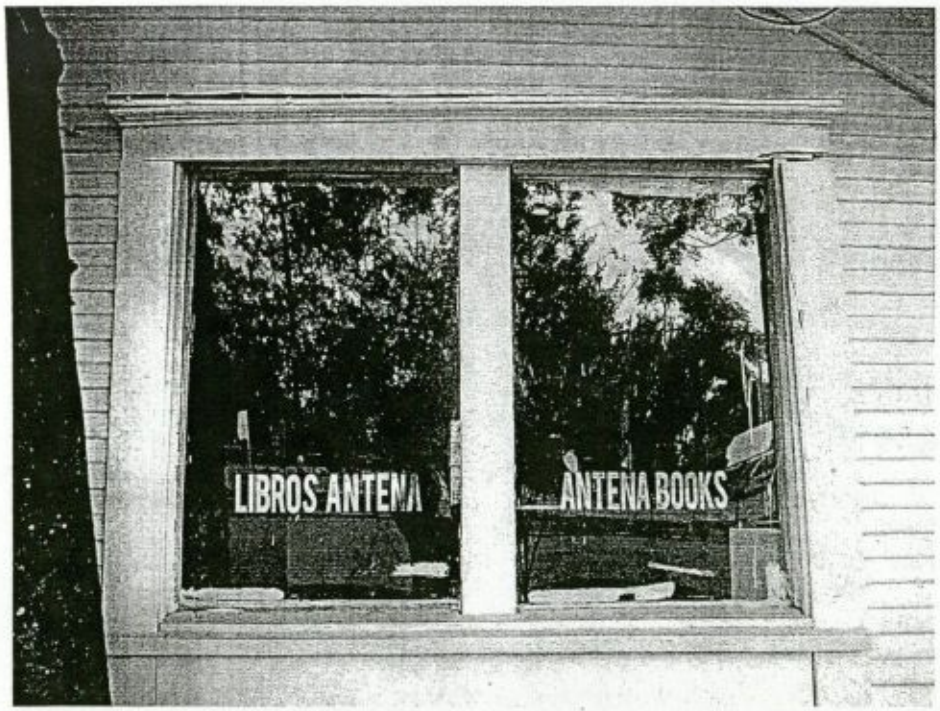
When We Said This Was A Space, We Meant We Are People

Notes on Making and Performing Antena @ Project Row Houses



Antena

Jen Hofer and John Pluecker


LIBROS ANTENA
ANTENA BOOKS

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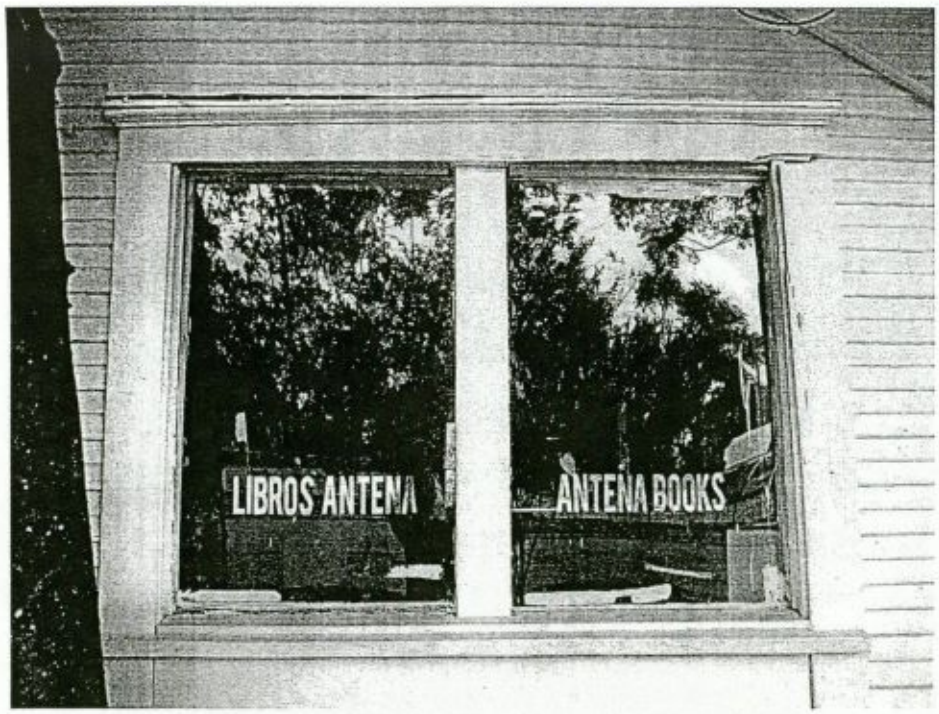


Antena

Jen Hofer and John Pluecker

we were all familiars in the obscenity of cities
and to be gentle here, perhaps not so obscure
and to labor in a snail state, a minstrelsy disco
and to seek refuge, a spinning wheel at the fair
and to dive into the otherwise, breaking the fast
—Akilah Oliver

Somewhere between Cumbia Tribalera and Luce Irigaray, my heart lies fallow.
Somewhere between Calibre 50 and Jack Halberstam, future gleams.
—Antena at Project Row Houses log, Thursday 5/23/12

La claridad no hace más que distorsionar la realidad.
Clarity only distorts reality.
—Cecilia Vicuña; untranslation by Felipe Ehrenberg

Wednesday 4/4/12, 12:08—What if in everything we failed and what if we began to see that failure as evidence of our visibility? Visible failure, visible potential: whorls and swirls of tree-prints on plywood sheets covering what once were windows. There are 26 bones in each human foot. Floorboards worn from years of walking, repetitive motion, repetitive and non-repetitive thinking. Repeated brutalities, or just the everyday movements of tasks, relations, nourishments. *Sunday 4/8/2012,15:36—I don't think I will ever know what I need to do in this space.*

Kaia Sand: "...I began to wonder how we might map the thickness of time and its political history. Where were all those graves Lucille urged me to remember? Beneath condominiums? Under widening swells of water? Within pastures of graves more clearly marked? If we couldn't see them, how could we remember them?"

The house has two doors, in a direct line with one another. Painted wood floors. White walls. A column in the middle (weight-bearing, structural), brick with sheetrock. Windows on each wall. 565 square feet. The walls are white and have been painted over many times.

Wednesday 4/11/12, 13:47—Jesse Lott visits the Antena space, comes in and sits down with an old friend (who it seems he has not seen in years). We chat. Off and on, his friend recites poetry (her own and others'). I invite her to type it on the typewriter, but she says she's not interested. So I offer to type it for her as she declaims. She assents.

Once in life when I was young, pretty and a good looker
I had the attitude of a hooker.

But God didn,t tolerate that mess
Because he desired my best.

Once went to jail
My savior didn,t fail

Went my bail
And opened the jail cell.

I socialize with the beggar and the street hustler
Broken bread with thereal ~~Cal Russel~~ cattle rustler

T herefore I preise on and glorify God
That he,s blessed me with this gift of poetry

To make others pay attentio n
To what I mention

You see its not me , it,s the Holy Spirit
I feel it, and he gives me what to say
in a special way.

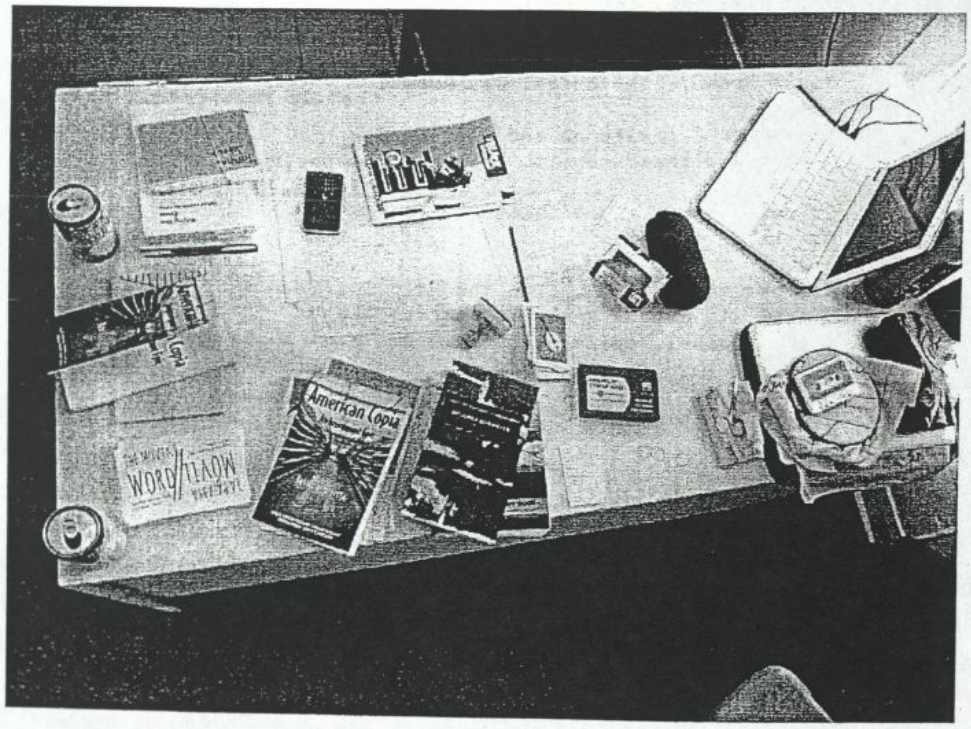
- Lajean Robinson

Dictation becomes a process of error-making; the copying and recording fills the page with mistakes, miscommunication, intention, representation. Why document anything at all? And yet we continue to type, even now months later in an attempt to express something about an experience now past. Now passed.

14:52—Jesse Lott repairs a hole in the floor. Then stays to talk about Tulsa killings, Trayvon Martin, racist violence, his time in Houston. He also broke down the distinctions between Probable Cause, Probability, Association and Evasion. He said his son was [redacted] *I should have asked more about his son. I asked for music recommendations, and he suggested Django Reinhardt.*

Holes at the base. Holes in this base.

We sewed books. We read quietly and aloud. We drank endless cans of coconut water and fizzy water from the cooler in the two-story in an unsuccessful attempt to refresh ourselves. Living within the cliché of the heat. Thinking about all the other bodies that sweated in this same house, all that liquid soaking into the floorboards and the earth beneath the piers and beams. We made hand-stamped cards with Antena's info on the backs of lotería decks. We made recordings of some of the poems created in the Read/Write Club. We kept count of the 1600 people who walked through our installation during three months in 2012. We kept a log of books sold and borrowed; we could not possibly catalogue books contemplated, leafed through, fondled, held in the hand or mind. Sparks. Embers. We kept a log of our time in the space, writing every hour, or more, or less. A non-exhaustive annotation of JP's three months, 25 hours a week in the space; an incomplete cartography of Jen's almost-three-week visit; a catalog of conflict and cariño, of making a living collaboration. Sometimes unusual or dazzling or remarkable moments occurred; most times the log reflects internal musings or repeating observations of the various moments that tended to repeat during a day or over many days.



An older black man comes in
Man comes back in
Raining off and on
Bus passes towards downtown
A siren flares
Rain is falling
A young boy is yelling outside "The houses are open." He comes in
An older white man comes in
An Af-Am man and woman come in
A mother and daughter arrive, browse

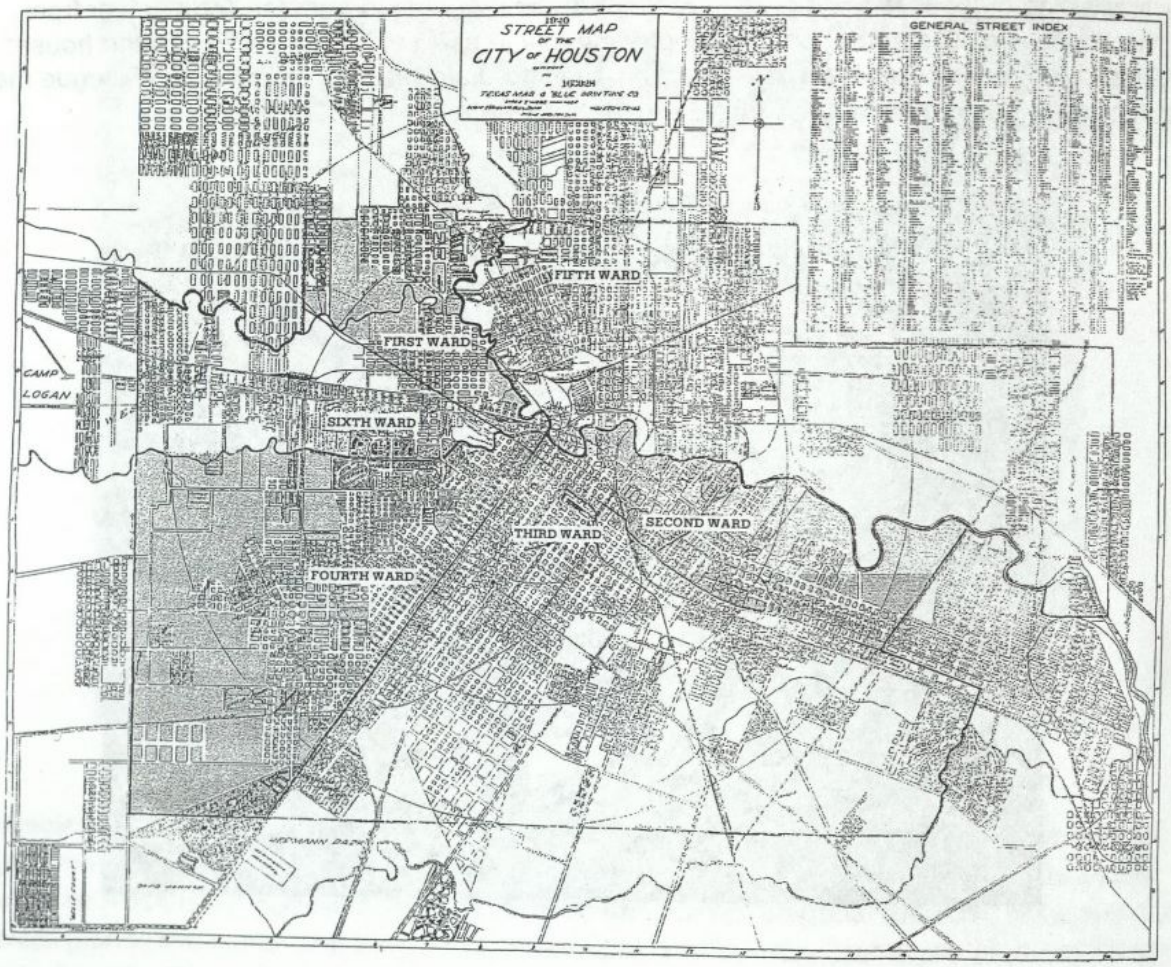
A young boy comes in with no shoes on, just socks
A woman comes in
Guy who has been walking back and forth outside for hours comes in
Guy walks in
Birds tweeting, closed blinds, fan spinning, air thick
A man just came in
Earlier, two young people came in
Funny how sitting in one space makes you available to chat
A group of nursing students showed up
Friendly woman in the space
It is hot as a row house in June in Houston in here
Our air is unconditioned and remains simply as it is—hot, oppressive, and pressing
People come in and talk
So many people. So many heat. So many sweatiness. So many lack of air
The heat is heavy and makes my brain molasses
A lawyer is in the space
I've been trying to write you this sentence (write us this sentence?) for about two hours
A steady stream of people enters: interact, type, purchase, read
Steaming, entirely wet, but from within, so not dripping, just porously damp
Two white folks walk in looking confused
Church group started up our stairs
Pouring
Total whirlwind: 18 kids and 4 adults, part of a daycare program
Pouring intensely again
A butterfly came in through the back door
Young woman reads aloud in the space in Spanish to her friend
An older man comes into the space
Group of young folks were in here just after that guy came in
The sound of the fans
Whatever thought I was thinking to note here interrupted

Rectangles. Squares. Hexagons. Geodesic. Shapes that have no name. Shapes that have no shape. One tree fallen into a chain link fence, cleanly. A comb. Three cats. The record of what occurred or might have occurred: cut logs, broken tree stump, diagonal footpath, razor wire, fluted concrete (minus the hands that shaped it), impromptu landfill, inexplicable pile of mulch, for sale, for sale, for sale. Future homes. Past homes. Pay phones. A tree or phenomenon named for a weather event. "We buy houses cash."

A light twinkling of a bell in the air, as if the sound were coming in from far, far away or from another dimension. The sound often accompanied by Jesse Lott's slow pacing by the house: "Artist-at-Large." Making conversation, visiting, making dialogue in spaces where dialogue may or may not have existed otherwise. It takes someone doing it to make it happen.

It took Jesse and the other founders of Project Row Houses—a space dedicated to "transforming community through the celebration of art and African-American history and culture"—to step out and begin repairing and reconstructing the abandoned row houses on Holman Street between Dowling and Live Oak. It took John Biggers and his monumental paintings and murals to investigate and re-create architectural history based on these row houses. It took all the labor of recently-freed people (still not entirely free, if by "freedom" we mean civil and human rights) to root West African architectural practices in the soil of the Gulf Coast.

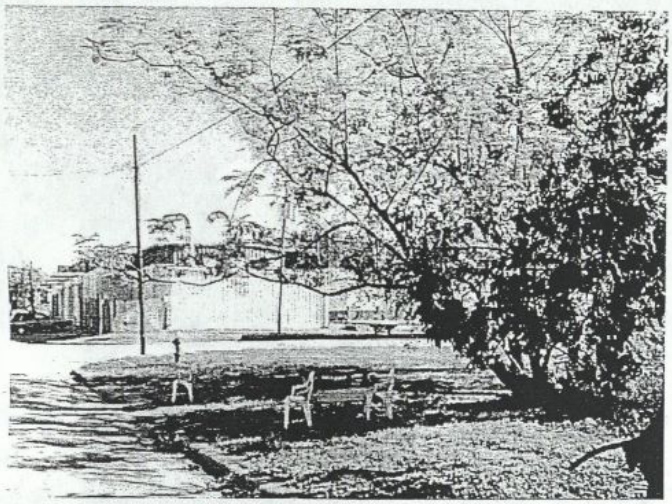
After a month or so, I put two and two together: I asked Jesse Lott why the bell on his ankle. He told me why. If you see him one day, you can ask him. He's around.



The house has straightforward wooden bookshelves, book stands made of old vinyl records, cards with the names of presses typed onto them and an old couch underneath the front windows, covered in a polka-dotted cloth. There is a desk with a chair behind it, a small fridge, a small bookcase with books for trade and flyers for local events in piles on top, a high shelf for displaying handmade books kids have created in the Antena space and the Babelbox, our simultaneous interpreting equipment. There are two white boxes in the space: one in the corner with Antenets, a digital poem-making program by Houston artist David Feil filtering Jen Bervin's filtrations of Shakespeare; another in the middle of the front part of the space, with two typewriters on it, back to back, and stacks of beige paper. It is a fact that small children enjoy pressing multiple typewriter keys simultaneously: a sculpture fashioned out of a mass of entangled metal letters. It is a fact that many typewriters cease to function well when their keys are used as raw material for sculpture. There are two t-shirts made by young people in a silkscreen workshop at the Bastrop House with artist Gabriel Martínez, in memory of Trayvon Martin, in outrage.

Street corners. Sidewalks. Flood plains. Bridges. Underpasses. Bayous. Fences.

How do we learn to speak with each other? How do we become able to speak at all?

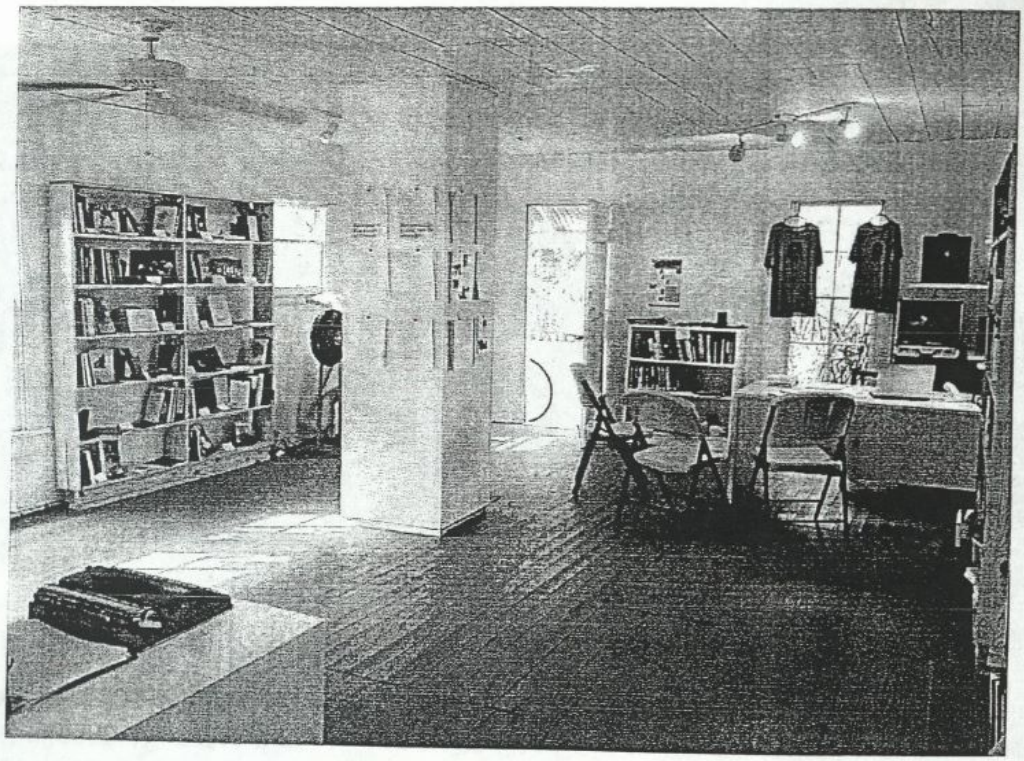


Familiarity: both a barrier and a conduit to seeing.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the country with more than 2 million residents in the city and 6.2 million in the metro area. More than 15,000 people live in Third Ward. In Houston, the percentage of the population living below the poverty level is 19.2%. In Third Ward, 46.3% of people live below the poverty level. Houston is approximately 25% African-American and 44% Latin@. Third Ward is roughly 80% African-American and 10% Latin@.

Underbrush. Overgrowth. Skeletal structures. Trash forming topographical bodies beneath sharp bright grass. Languages nestle inside each other. Difficult to learn how to listen. Ceaseless versions of language in abundance.

So much is lost—but not lost in translation, lost in experience. Which is translation. As writing itself is experience. Leslie Scalapino: "Writing not having any relation to event/being it—by being exactly its activity. It's the 'same thing' as life (syntactically)—it *is* life."



What is documented is a corrosion, a process of loss, a recuperation of what might never have existed in the first place. Or perhaps the precise opposite is true.

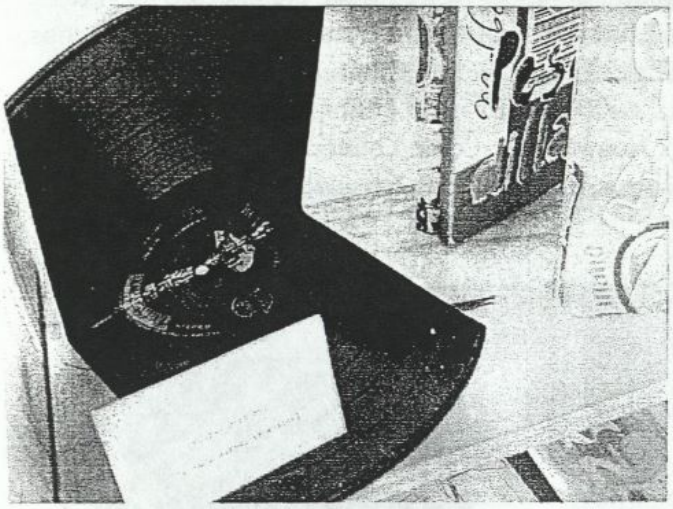
Saturday 4/28/12, 12:28—There is no blank page
with you in the room.

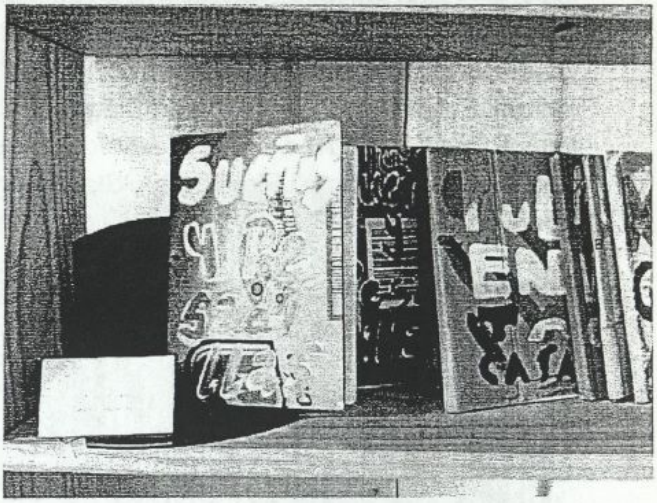
We arrive at this idea multiple times, via multiple routes.

Rosmarie Waldrop: "The blank page is not blank. We…always write on top of a palimpsest... It is a way of getting out of myself. Into what? An interaction, a dialog with language, with a whole net of earlier and concurrent texts. Relation. Between."

Craig Santos Perez: "no page is ever truly blank"

Perhaps what is documented is the space we carve out—a hollow or outline filled in by our absence, which is our presence—from the layer-upon-layer cacophony of what is already there, which we both can and cannot perceive. Our lack of perception doesn't mean those histories are any less present. Our perception always accompanied by lack. *Wednesday 6/6/12, 10:21—How much was coming to PRH an encounter with experience? Did I even know I was in search of experience?*





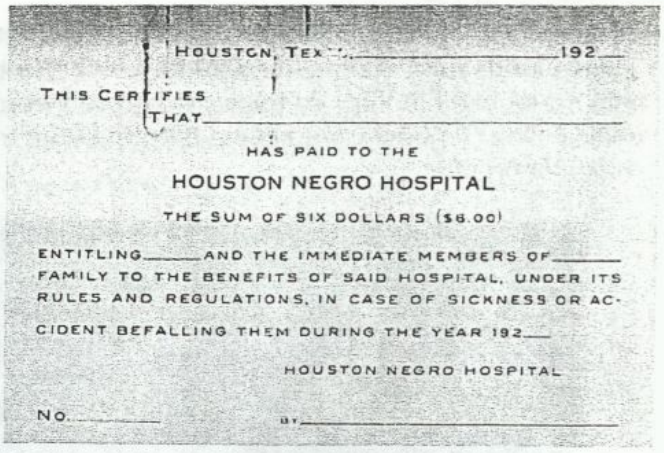
The fan whirred. Bryanda biked over and read a poem she wrote after reading Akilah Oliver's work. A bus went by outside. The fan whirred. Rebecca wrote a poem she wrote after reading Ronaldo Wilson. The tears are audible in her voice. Chills. The fan whirred.

Among others, presses featured in the Antena space included: 1913 Press, Action Books, Arte Público Press, Belladonna, Black Goat (Akashic), Chainlinks, Corollary Press, Counterpath Press, Cypher Books, Displaced Press, dorothy, Ediciones del Lago, Eloísa Cartonera, Future Plan and Program, Futurepoem Books, Insert Blanc Press, Les Figues Press, Letter Machine Editions, Litmus Press, Little Red Leaves (Textile Series), Noemi Press, Open Letter Books, Poems-For-All, Regia Cartonera, Small Fires Press, Stamped Books, Sur Plus, and Ugly Duckling Presse. Among others.

Tuesday 5/22/12, 18:00—A performance of a failed business model. (*Joel told me that it would be a better idea to sell action books or comics.*) Why it might be important to fail (where "failed" suggests alternatives to capitalism or profit). Akilah Oliver's words resonating, now as imperatives: Labor in a snail state. Seek refuge. Dive into the otherwise. *An experiment in negative production*—using bookselling as a durational performance to create space for writing that thrives at the fringes of, in the otherwise. Otherhow. An analog: using writing—the performance of unconventional grammars or non-instrumental modes to bring attention to forms of agency possible when imagination and expression are used as political tools. What would happen if we heard "success" every time someone used the term "failure?"

A pillar in the middle of the space holds up each row house. The pillar in our house designated as a place for documentation, for typed and handwritten notes, poems, observations, instigations. To hold the whole thing up. To begin, we placed words to gesture toward possibilities, to invite participation. To begin, we stole a moment from the title of Akilah Oliver's book, *A Toast in the House of Friends*.

Welcome is not Bienvenid@s. Feel comfortable no es Siéntate cómod@. Use these books and Use estos libros. Bring books to barter no es Traiga libros para intercambiar. Ask for something unexpected. Pida algo inesperado. Write on the walls. Escriba en las páredes. (Pocos se atrevieron a hacerlo). Experiment is not Experimente. How could we Risk everything? Seguir arriesgando todo. Erase y Borra.



HOUSTON, TEXAS, _____ 192__

THIS CERTIFIES
THAT _____

HAS PAID TO THE

HOUSTON NEGRO HOSPITAL

THE SUM OF SIX DOLLARS ($6.00)

ENTITLING _____ AND THE IMMEDIATE MEMBERS OF _____ FAMILY TO THE BENEFITS OF SAID HOSPITAL, UNDER ITS RULES AND REGULATIONS, IN CASE OF SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT BEFALLING THEM DURING THE YEAR 192__

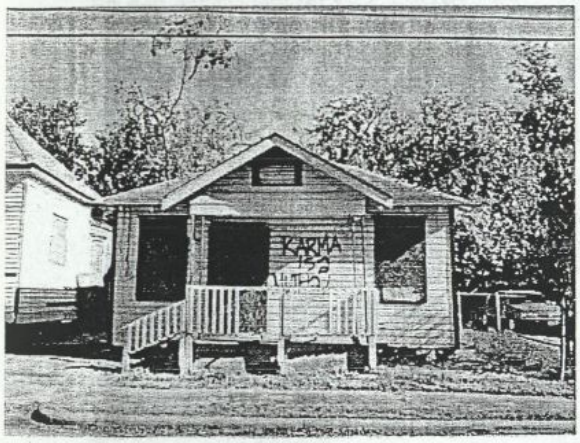
HOUSTON NEGRO HOSPITAL

NO. _____ BY _____

Supreme Lounge, Teague Miracle Temple, Master Signs, Tom's Cleaning and Same-Day Alteration, Jet Set Barber Shop ("style cuts"), Hair By Rhonda "D," Mack H. Hannah Life Insurance, Savoy U-Pak-Em, Alternativè Medicine and Pharmacy, H & H Community Shine Parlor, Fontenot's Cajun Hut ("¡Bienvenidos!" "Thank you!"), Unity National Bank, Htown Sportswear and Fashion, Blodgett's Fish Market, Blodgett St. Store, This Is It Houston Soul Food, Midtown Kidney Center, Ebony Hair Supply, Neil's Haircare Salon, Cut Creators Barber Shop, Heaven's Best Montessori School, Blodgett Café, YWCA, Pilgrim Congregation, Pilgrim Community Center, BMB Food Store, Frenchy's Chicken, Wheeler Street Cleaner's.

Third Ward could be a history of shrinking or a history of expansion, a history of resistance or a history of repression, a history of sight or a history of deafness, a history of segregation or a history of integration. A history of disintegration or a history of imagination.

In the nineteenth century, Third Ward reached deep into Downtown: all the way from its Western boundary with Main Street across to the train tracks cutting through the East End. In early maps, Third Ward dominated the southeast portion of the city, and later slowly whittled away as highways (288 and 45) constructed new boundaries. New names for places were invented (Midtown, Eado) to replace Third Ward. Claims staked. Values established.



A history of spiritual and practical expansion. What some see as blight others recognize as the products of great struggle, the after-shocks of literal and physical assassination. Wheeler Avenue a tree-lined pedestrian walkway, curving through Texas Southern University. Each brick in the place of a person, bodies on the line that closes the street down. Each building along Dowling a reminder of its Black business district during segregation. The Eldorado Ballroom. The People's Party II—Houston offshoot of the Black Panthers. Riverside Hospital, the first Black hospital west of the Mississippi and the only historically Black hospital remaining today in the U.S. Herman Marion Sweatt. I.M. Terrell. John Biggers. Lynn Eusan. Carl Hampton. Lee Otis Johnson. How many people whose names we don't know. Your name—our names—here.

I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this
I had said I wasn't going to write no more words down about people kicking us when we're down
About racist dogs that attack us and drive us down, drag us down and beat us down
But the dogs are in the street
— Gil Scott-Heron

Loud signs proclaiming who can do what where. "Stealthy desegregation." Silos. Rigs. Resistance redefined as riot. Surveillance. Self-immolation. Police brutality redefined as assault on a police officer. Brass doors. Redistribution. Renovation. Redevelopment. Plywood. Capital punishment.

Our presence in layers over many layers that already exist, are fully or partially erased or are not erased at all, the silences of what is unspoken—or worse, spoken but unheard—humming unquietly beneath the surface of the structures we invent to materialize our mobility or suspension.

Saturday 6/16/12, 16:00—How do we decide the rules for something that is already in progress? How do we decide the constraints and the guidelines for something when we do not even know what it is?

To provide a public space for reading, dialogue and writing. Holding up innovative and experimental and risk-taking work by writers of color: often feminist and queer: often in translation. Questions of contextualization and making revolution in and through language. So we devised the idea of a weekly Read/Write Club with a reading list but no "homework" per se: just come ready to talk, listen, write, read. Some of the authors: Akilah Oliver, Javier Huerta, Douglas Kearney, Ronaldo V. Wilson, Cecilia Vicuña, Renee Gladman, Dolores Dorantes. We read. We paid attention. We roamed inside conversation. We wrote together. We wrote separately. We read aloud. We sat in silence. A space to stop.

A space to breathe together, synchronically.

A man comes in. He sits down at the desk and we speak. Then he begins to read texts from the Bible out loud: verses, whole chapters. He continues for a long while. (Oddly, I don't document this experience at all in the log. There's no record. Now I am recreating this moment from the shreds of memory left behind.)

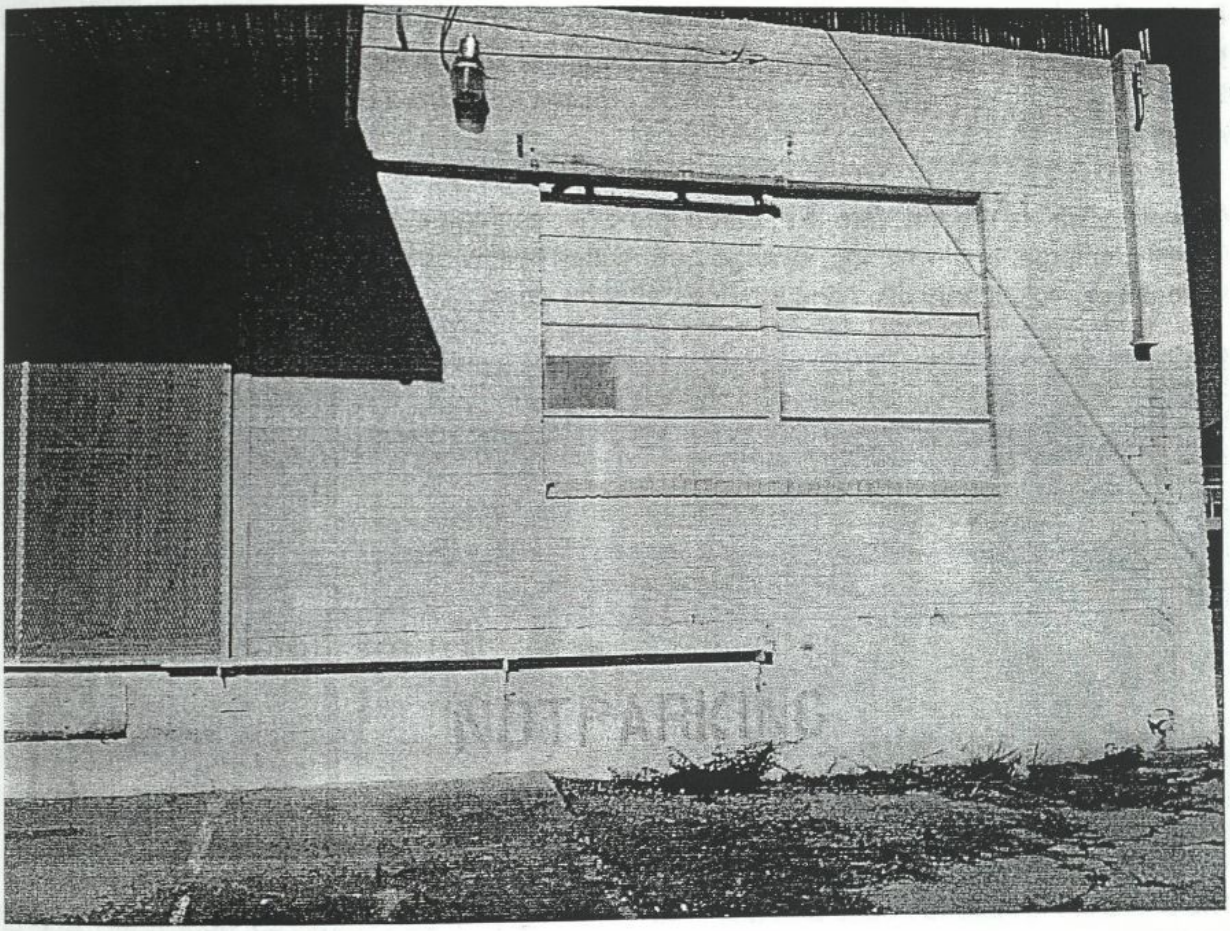
On that day says the Lord of hosts, I will cut off th e
names of the idols from the land, what would no moere
from the land and if any prophets and the unclean
spirit. On that day the prophets will be ashamed. aI amno
prophet, on my chest just like UI receive the wounds the

"What are these wounds on your chest?"
the answer will be "The wounds I received in the house of my friends."

Zacherias 13

Then he stands, and I stand. We move around, walking from one end of the house to the other. (Oddly, memory like a dream state. Scraps of moments amplified.) We end up by the typewriters. He reads and reads. I can hardly understand, the man is reciting so quickly, preaching hypnotically. I ask him if he'd like to transcribe something from the Bible on the typewriters. He declines. I ask if I could type out what he is saying. He assents. I start typing the text above. He goes faster and faster, as if hurrying to make dictation impossible. I miss entire words, phrases, sentences. My interpretation is not accurate, it's slipping, slipping. I stop him and ask to hear the last line again. He repeats it: "'What are these wounds on your chest?' the answer will be 'The wounds I received in the house of my friends.'"

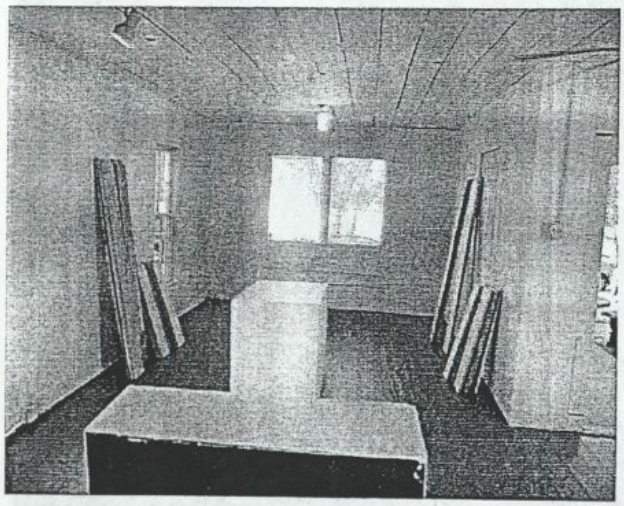
Synchronically.

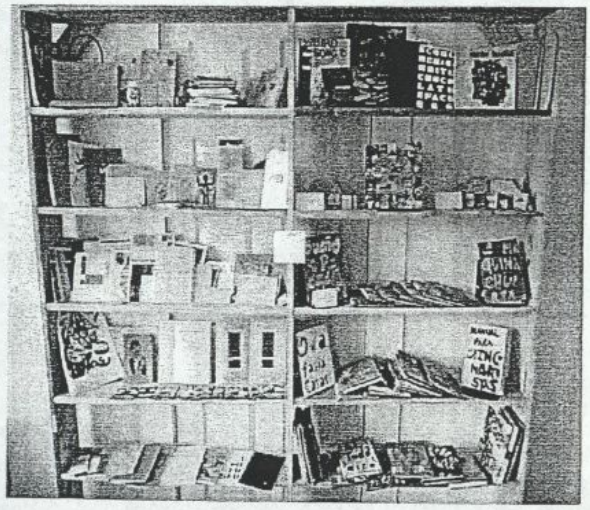


A tunnel of trees. A silo of milk. A tunnel of freeway. A flood zone. Wild sunflowers. A tunnel of pilings. Piles. Oak acorns and cracked or smooth asphalt underfoot. Patterns of brick and patterns of grasses and patterns of trellises, fencing, railings. Recognized divisions. Unrecognized divisions. Two hand-painted "No Trespassing" signs on a house with no door. The parts of a neighborhood lost to infrastructure. Within. Without. Vines growing over electrical lines that run to an empty house. Particle board eyes. Corrugated. "No trespass."

Boxes of books arrive into the little row house from all over the country and the world. Boxes and boxes from Small Press Distribution, wondrous nurturers of the writing experiments that are our home. An ecology of small and tiny and micro presses from around the United States and Latin America.

An ecology whose tendrils, fern-like, unfurl into other ecologies. In this niche, strange new species of writing emerge. In this writing, strange new niches hollow out. Spaces for echo. A literary rainforest of evolutionary blips and fabulous abnormalities.





The books in the Antena house broadcast the existence of a de-centralized, horizontal model of publishing—a practice of making spaces among various publics for work that exceeds or destabilizes or simply ignores the limits of the normative publishing world. DIY/DIT: Do-It-Yourself/Do-It-Together.

We make the literary worlds we want to inhabit. We want to inhabit your world too.

Publish a book on cardboard or fold some stolen photocopies or make a literary journal out of matchbooks or print a book on newsprint or make a sample, a mash-up, a collage or a manifesto out of materials you find in a dumpster. Define "book" in ways we can't even imagine yet. Bring the means of production down to a kitchen table or a streetside stall. Be mobile, low-fi, and unafraid to fail or get your hands dirty.

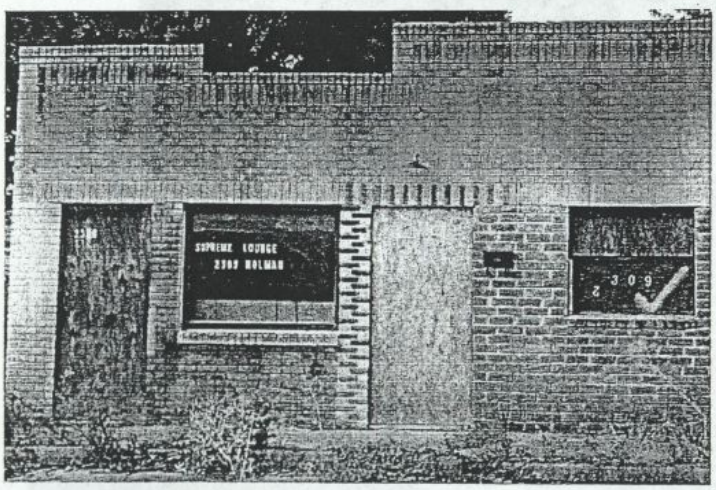
Someone wrote these lines and clipped them to the documentation pillar: "Impidamos los imperios del yo / ... / everywhere / ... / Es todo / A Beatriz Sarlo."

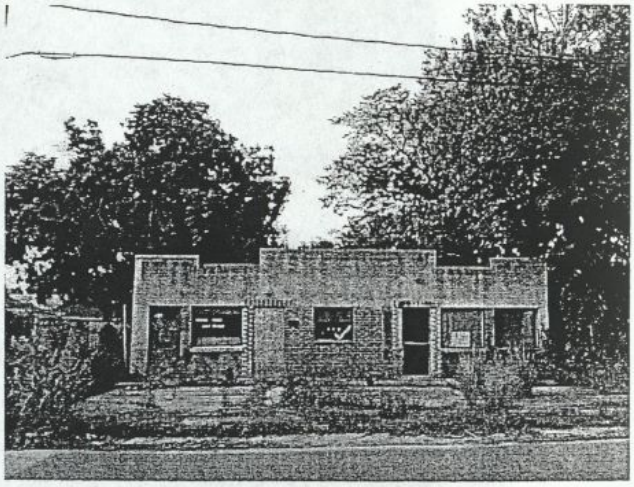
Let's block the empires of the I / .../ en todos lados / ... / That's all. / For Beatriz Sarlo.

We went looking for context. On the trail of a reference. We found a column in Argentina's *La Nación* titled "Los imperios del yo," in which Sarlo critiques the current president, Cristina Kirchner, for using the first person singular in her rhetoric: a neverending monoloque of first-person anecdotes. Sarlo's inquiry: "If she were to leave the first person behind, she might enter into a plural we. And we—who are we? The answer can't be found solely in the garden of autobiographical subjectivity."

Beyond the unitary "I," outside of our own imagined singularity, other horizons emerge. Beyond the garden, what might be planted, grow wild, spread like weeds.

Contradictions and complexities abound in the geography of Third Ward. Or geography abounds. The dividing line at Truxillo between North and South. The Northern reaches full of semi-rural large lots given over to various forms of nature: cracks in the cement, trees and vines and plants, impromptu foot paths, illegal dumping, piles of storm debris. Small wooden houses built for African Americans fleeing rural areas, rural oppressions. South of Truxillo sturdy brick bungalows and two story mansions along Isabella or Rosewood or Ruth. Brick structures that housed Jewish, Italian and German families prior to integration. Prior to flight.





Third Ward is priceless and valueless. Languishing and gentrifying. Not for sale or on the market. "Midtown" town homes in neat shades of beige form militarized rows of opportunity, march into the heart of the neighborhood across what was previously a barrier: a 24-lane highway.

A history of brick or wood, dirt or tree. A history of air.

joel rangelest er ctisnopuede star er mas muertoo

Joel spent nearly every afternoon in the Antena house. His first few times, he'd walk through alone; his mom stood outside, talking on the phone or not talking on the phone, just waiting. Le tuve que invitar a que pasara adentro un montón de veces hasta que por fin decidió meterse. Joel tocaba los libros, pasaba de un lado a otro dentro del espacio, investigando, mirando. Un día me pidió libros para niños; ese día le prometí traer más. Casi todos los días de la semana, venía a visitarme después de que saliera de la escuela. Platicamos, leímos en español. Un día le di una clase de lectura en español porque en la escuela jamás le habían enseñado a leer en su primer idioma. Joel pensaba que no sabía leer en español, pero sí, sí sabía. Trabajamos en eso unos días. Un día maquiló un librito de papel e imágenes recortadas. Otro día, Joel me mostró sus videos favoritos en YouTube: *Inténtalo* de 3Ball MTY y *El tierno se fue* de Calibre 50.

Joel escribió el texto que ves arriba en la imágen.

An untranslation of the text might be: JOEL RANGELIS TH IS COUNTRYCOULDNT BE E MORE DEAAD.

Sunday 4/8/12, 15:36—A man just came in. A middle-aged black man smelling of sweat and carrying a big bag. He said he had scoliosis. There is a guy with glasses doing a tribute to Jerry Rothenberg on Pennsound on my computer screen. Today I wonder if anyone will do a tribute for this man who just came in. Today I think I should write a tribute book to this man, who walked in, grabbed the side of the desk and lowered himself to the floor, talking about his scoliosis. I went and got the man a chair so he could sit. He sat. I asked if he wanted water, I got him some. He took a half-empty bottle of frozen water out of his bag and poured the water from the cup into the bottle.

Tuesday 5/22/12, 18:00—People ask if they can pick up a book. If they can "touch" them.

Thursday 6/1/12, 12:03—It's a small house. In a small neighborhood. In a medium-sized city. In a big state. In a big country. In a gigantic world.

Friday 6/15/12, 14:27—The interruption of thought. Which is a constant constantly, actually. I don't know which contexts allow for threads of thought to unspool or spool continuously, without branching off. Perhaps not-branching is not a feature of thinking. Or perhaps it would be cleaner to say that perhaps branching is a feature of thinking.

16:38— Nikala reads poetry: If one day you come, I shall vanish.

Wednesday 6/20/12, 12:54—Pouring. The sound is so beautiful. The fluttering trees above the corrugated horizon of the neighboring row house.

What is documented when we document our experience? Experience is a series of moments. No. Experience is the air around moments (sometimes encompassing them and sometimes not). The ligaments and ligatures that knit the spaces between (an architecture of lines and alleys and bayous, immeasurable measurements). No. A translation without architecture. No. A translation is architecture. Or rather, what we are able to document is emphatically not experience, but writing can create the effects of the feeling of experience.

It felt overwhelming. It felt spacious. It felt breathless. It felt like there was room to breathe. It felt like not knowing. It felt like learning to read. It felt like intuitive navigation devices. It felt like building. It felt like channeling. It felt like effort. It felt like feeling.

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