

**The Flame Through the Bridge:**  
**Notes and Transcripts from Improvised**  
**Interpreted Poem Performances**  
**2014 - 2019**

by Antena Aire (Jen Hofer + John Pluecker)

# TRIPWIRE

## a journal of poetics

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cover image: Antena Aire, Tucson, 2019, aftermath of improvised interpreted poem performance, backyard of TC Tolbert and Rosie Perera, Tucson AZ.

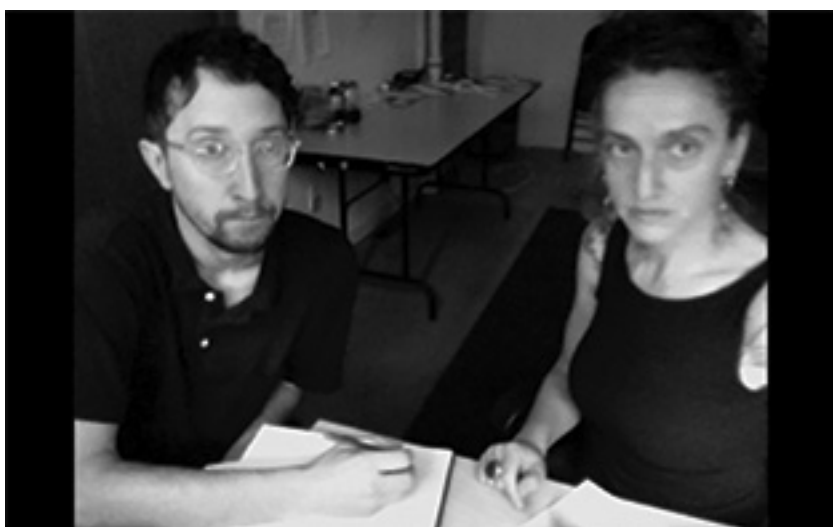
Antena Aire would like to thank all the people luchando y amando entre idiomas en nuestras comunidades, the brave organizadorxs y alquimistas, the caregivers getting their kids off to school on their own before heading to work, las mujeres que hacen comida en las calles, the people keeping indigenous languages alive, la comunidad de justicialenguajerxs practicing badass cross-language beauty and inspiring us to learn more every day, the people who have invited us to make these poems and the writers whose words spark ours, our queer families and lovers who keep us alive in interdependence, the editors who have cared about this work and supported it, y todxs lxs lectorxs que van a pasar tiempo con este librito. abrazos solidarios.

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## Opening

These are notes to think through our performances. Or these are performances of our thinking. Thoughts that annotate our poems. Poems that annotate our thoughts.



Video stills: Antena Aire

*Performed July 19 and July 20, 2013  
at The Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, New York  
five poems over two days, for each other and on video*

The first five performances were experiments in welcoming error. The unexpected and imperfect as drivers of our collaboration. The interruption of our possible “expertise.” These were some of our first attempts at using cross-language practices as generative strategies for creative work.

We were in the midst of writing three manifestos and two how-to guides—our first explicit efforts toward collaborative writing as Antena, now called Antena Aire. We were attempting to write out the theories, principles, ethics, and thinking that were at the heart of our work up to that point, over the three previous years. We were learning how to work with one another. We were swimming in the ideas of the pamphlets on a daily basis: uncomfortable writing, interpreting as instigation, ultratranslation, language justice, defamiliarizing language in our writing. And we wanted to devise an experiment that would make that thinking corporeal, living in the tongue and the hand. We decided to try something new. Something weird.

## Once again I could feel

*after Claudina Domingo and Renee Gladman*

Once again  
I could feel her  
nearness  
a threat  
for weeks  
there was black  
sky bruising  
black smoke  
bruising the sky  
but the sky  
was clear  
inside the sky  
there was a number  
of moths flying  
a number  
of windy  
moths flying  
a cliff  
an abyss  
windy moths  
bruising the sky  
the cliff would be  
the nearness  
of leaves  
in the wind  
leaves are not moths  
leaves are moths  
one must make  
current must make  
leaves current

We've been asking ourselves and others for years: what would it look like, sound like, feel like, taste like—which histories would be uncovered, licked into visibility—if we were to listen with our tongues?

What we devised, through trial and error and practice and experimentation, was an improvised uncomfortable text-generating experiment based on a repeating, spiraling practice of collaborative interpretation and addition, for which we invented a few key constraints to guide us. We work back and forth across Spanish and English, the two languages we each use in our daily lives. We make poems in the space between the two, and through practices we use in our everyday cross-language work. We begin with one text fragment in one language. This text fragment is immediately interpreted into the other language by the listener, using consecutive interpretation; the interpreter-improviser then adds one text fragment in that same language. After the reading and initial interpretation of each of our “found” texts, every time one of us “interprets,” we add a line or two of our own invention, for a total of (more or less) five sets of improvised “interpretations.” Our rules are that we have to take new notes on a new sheet of paper or cover our old notes every time we interpret (to avoid simply transferring notes and/or memorizing text blocks), and that we can return to the same original text if we want to include more of those lines rather than improvised lines of our own.

While this experiment is grounded in the technique of consecutive interpretation, where a speaker pauses every so often to allow an interpreter to deliver their message in another language, it differs significantly from actual interpreting, and in fact violates many of the central guidelines of the practice. In our working lives as interpreters, we would never perform live interpretations of poetry or other literary texts—it's just impossible. Rather, if a speaker is going to read a poem as part of their presentation, we prefer that they provide a translation of that material to us in advance. Additionally, in almost all instances of interpretation, we'd be aware of the context of the speaker's comments, which would usually follow a basic logic and create a fairly legible linearish narrative. Context and logic are turned upside down when we oblige ourselves to interpret improvised lines that have only a poetic relationship (often neither logical nor linear) to the preceding lines. Finally, in our practice as interpreters, we would never, ever embellish or improvise based on what we are interpreting—quite the contrary, we would do our very best to fulfill the part of the interpreter's role that centers on accuracy and competency, and would endeavor to transmit the message as directly as possible, adhering as closely to what we heard as possible, with no omissions and no additions—and certainly no poetic improvisations.

We break key rules of interpreting. We invent new constraints for the experiment. The process is eminently uncomfortable. And the result: a uncomfortable text, an interpretation-inspired instigation, an ultratranslation. A poem. Not a poem.

## In order to be able to capture

*after Judith Butler and Carla Faesler*

In order  
to be able  
to capture  
it is necessary  
to interrupt  
before  
going in  
a question  
individuals are not  
asked to protect  
themselves  
nor are they  
told what they are  
protecting themselves  
from nor why  
they are  
protecting themselves  
from unforgettable  
monuments  
to stand firm  
to stand firm  
in a world  
without bridges  
a world that falls  
everyone is atomic  
everyone falls  
everyone atomic  
the prisoner could  
be denominated  
outside that  
denomination with no  
established criteria  
the prisoner stained  
with the ink  
of opacity  
and brightness is  
arrested



What we have come to realize in doing these experiments and now in translating them to these pages is that the “final poem” is neither final, nor the most important thing, nor the ultimate iteration of the experiment. The “poem” is the being in that moment, two bodies moving language back and forth, speaking and re-speaking it with our hands and our mouths, sloughing off and gathering as we go. And it is also a chance for us to bring other writers into the room and into our embodied practice of writing-that-is-not-writing, activating the kinship networks of poetry and writing that enable us to continue to do this work.

Where exactly does the poetry reside? In the performance or on the page where we find the transcribed “poem”? Or in the non-empty negative space that takes shape between the writers we quote, our own interpretations and improvisations, and the audiences who witness our discomfortableness? Do we even produce a poem, in the end, through this process? Do we care if we don’t? Or is the poem actually a kind of hovering or transit, residing in the doing, a process retained sometimes in the video produced of the performance and sometimes here transcribed on the page and sometimes in some undefinable other space or nowhere at all?

Part of the experiment, though, is also to parse through the possibility of creating a “poem” through this process. A process of alternative production of “poetry.” Anti-production? What if “poem” is a verb or an air (the substance we collectively breathe) (which we move through and which moves through us)? What if a poem undoes itself immediately upon arrival? Or never arrives? We could go back and forth in our interpreted improvised imaginative error-making endlessly, and perhaps that is part of what Antena Aire is. Using our politically-activated community-rooted cross-language practice as generative ground. Bringing our poetry brains and experimental bodies to bear on our everyday practices of language transfer. Doing a thing that doesn’t make sense to attempt to make a different kind of sense, a different kind of making. Improvising in a way that’s exploratory and responsive and vulnerable, consenting, as Dr. Adrienne Keene phrases it, to learn in public.

We co-founded Antena in 2010 as a language justice and language experimentation collective, and nearly immediately realized how crucial it would be to work with local compañerxs doing language justice organizing in our respective cities. Now, almost ten years into the complex web of practices and relations that float in the living breathing space Antena Aire knits, the day-to-day work of language justice organizing and social justice interpreting is conducted through two robust and evolving local sister collectives: Antena Houston and Antena Los Ángeles. The name Antena, in conjunction with Antena Houston and Antena Los Ángeles, felt like an umbrella, when what we wanted for these three sibling collectives—and what they are—is a name that would mark our horizontal and mutually nourishing mutually challenging relations. Antena Aire, as a name, as an expansive set of

frameworks and practices, describes the aesthetic and literary work we do as the air we breathe, a permeating and a porosity, a filling of the space between bodies and an exploratory way of moving. The passionate and committed labor of community work and language justice practices are the ground we walk every day with our compañerxs and collaborators in our local collectivities.

## The kites fall

*after Bhanu Kapil and Karen Villeda*

The kites fall  
in disgrace  
the flames do not  
illuminate  
what is sufficient  
the striking  
conviction  
that something  
is lost  
is a  
is psychotic  
the airplane outside  
is the flame inside  
there had been there  
it's not there was there  
the outside of an inside  
a green divided from  
what had been there  
is sufficient  
there outside  
in the inside  
of the flame of wood  
a woman walked  
in that plane  
on a map that isn't  
flat nor a plane nor  
a resolution  
one who crossed  
a bridge in and towards  
the back through  
the flame  
the flame through  
the bridge  
disappeared in flames

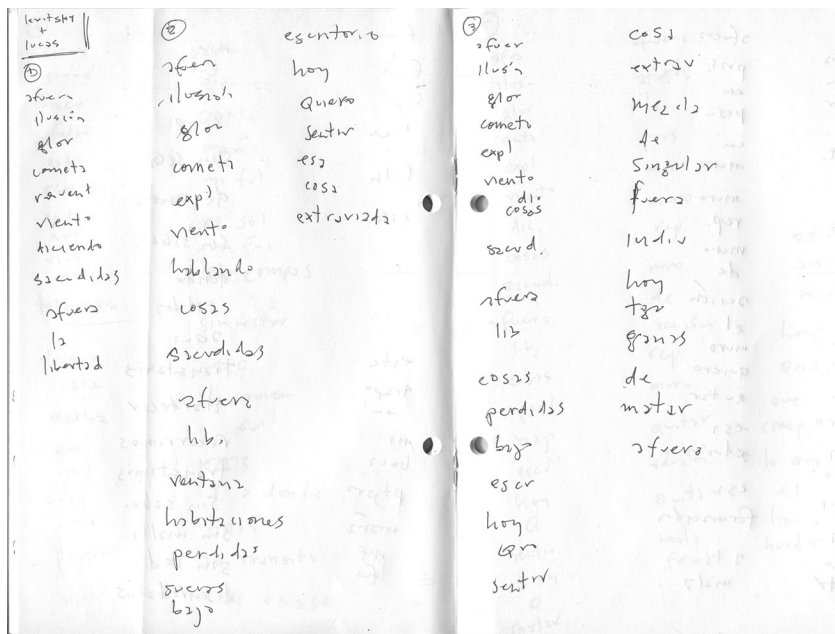
We had a conversation during the process of preparing these pages, as translating from video to page generated new questions: how to transcribe, delineate, punctuate, and capitalize. We wondered together: are these actually poems or transcripts? Are all poems transcripts of a sort? The question is not about a desire to categorize; rather we desire to think through the tensions inherent in how we talk about what we are doing. The act of transcription necessitates a form. It is impossible to move from the aural to the written without structuring those sounds on a page: certain decisions create certain forms. How, we wondered, to shift from the oral to the aural to the written without undoing the poetry by overly constricting or constraining it?

How to reproduce the dizzying freefall feeling of flight, motion, the back-and-forth drift of the unplanned that defies expectation? How might we represent the ephemeral on the page? The poem, written on the page, creates another moment. Another layer of translation. Perhaps equally fleeting, equally dizzying. Not all transcriptions are poems, but all poems transcribe a channeling. A kind of impossibility. A stubborn devoted playful labor. A commitment to making.

## It works

*After Nathan Hauke and Kirsten Jorgenson and  
Virginia Lucas*

It works  
and it makes  
me happy  
this corner  
where I live  
and I tolerate  
I tolerate  
I tolerate this  
rag in my  
mouth a bird  
the morning when  
I left I left  
with no compass  
with no certainty  
of who  
I was  
without knowing  
where I was  
here we  
transit sunset  
we move across  
we transit  
without knowing  
with no knowledge  
no yolk no net  
without a net



*Image: Antena Aire*

We decided to work on the page in short lines, enjambling and breaking, listing and stacking, replicating to some extent the structure of the notes we take while doing consecutive interpretation.

We posted videos of these initial iterations to our Vimeo page (<https://vimeo.com/antenaantena>). The videos are versions; they are not exactly what happened. Not exactly real. Videos purport to capture a series of ephemeral moments, and yet they exclude as much as they include. So much is left invisible. Sensed, unseen. These performances have remained in process and in flux as long as we do them.

The rules we established at the beginning are always changing, whether by our own mistakes or by our conscious decision-making. Perhaps the distinction between the two is not so clear-cut in any case.

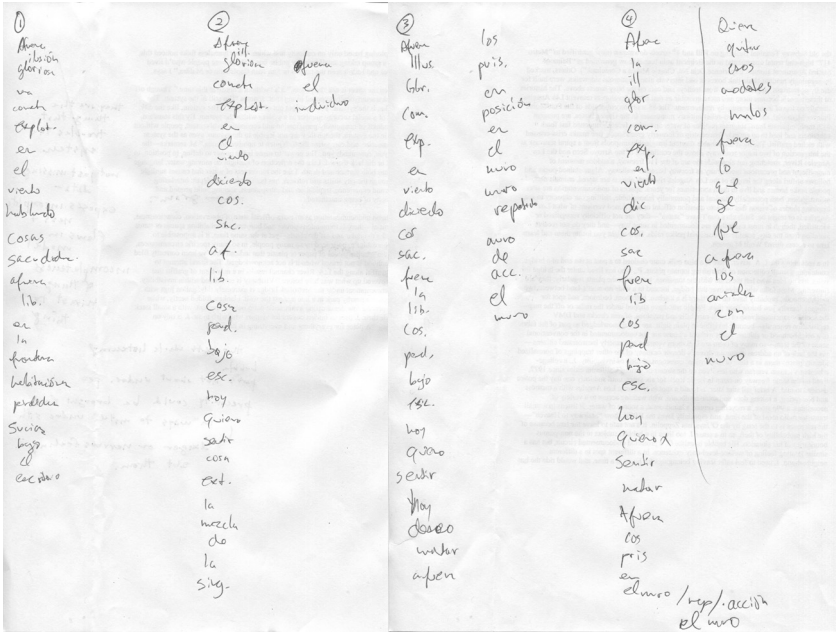


Image: Antena Aire

At some point we decided we'd work from original source material by different authors each time, but this next poem, pre-codification of our process, repeats one source. Our codes shift. We make decisions and then forget them, or modify them in the moment. We lose track, retrace our steps, veer off in another direction as we go. We decide we like our errors better than our original intentions. Our errors become our guidelines.

## Outside glorious illusion

*after Rachel Levitsky and Virginia Lucas*

Outside  
glorious illusion  
a comet exploding  
in the wind  
saying  
shaken things  
out with liberty  
lost things  
under the desk  
today I want  
to feel today  
I want to kill  
outside outside  
the prisoners  
against the wall  
the repeated wall  
the wall  
of repeated  
action the wall  
I want to get rid  
of education  
I want to get rid  
of bad manners  
outside  
animals  
a wall today  
I would like  
for us  
to share  
that thing  
that is  
to flee



## Lost Poem #1

*Performed January 16, 2014*

*at Blaffer Art Museum*

*as part of the opening for Antena @ Blaffer, co-curated with Amy Powell, which was a large-scale installation of books, art, and writing, accompanied by a range of bilingual programs and a collaboratively taught class.*

This performance was not recorded and has been lost. We do have a series of pictures though.



*Images: David Leftwich*

We do a thing. We don't record ourselves doing the thing, nor do we create any documentation of what we did or made. Then the thing becomes a thing, and we realize the documentation is part of the thing. The absence of having had a plan becomes part of what is presented in the piece: the poems we can no longer access pointing us toward new poems we're on the verge of making.

Enough time passes between one instance of performance and another (aside from our initial flurry of five performances in two days, with the camera as our only audience) that we run the risk of fraying the thread and then inevitably we decide that we prefer the thread frayed, grazing our fingertips just as it's coming undone. Becoming something else.

## Lost Poem #2

*Performed April 30, 2014  
at Alabama Song in Houston  
as part of a Suplex event, curated by Max Fields*

This performance was not recorded and has been lost. We do have two pictures.



*Images: unidentified audience member.*





*Video stills: Hannah Yoo*

*Performed April 4, 2014*

*at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston*

*as part of Adding a Beat: Hirsch Library Project, curated by Hannah Yoo*

For this performance, we ended up losing track of our rules, or forgetting that we'd set guidelines we meant to follow, or we made new rules specifically on this day, and we ended up using more than two texts, all of which we found in the Hirsch Library. Entering these texts and making space for them to enter our poem became a way of grounding ourselves in the space of the library, allowing the library itself to come alive in a different way, allowing for books in Spanish to be in dialogue with books in English, or for crossing to occur from one to another. Many books at the Hirsch are kept in the stacks in the basement; in our performance we brought them up into the light and they helped guide our way.

The books we chose from the stacks were: *JAAR SCL 2006* by Alfredo Jaar, *Alfredo Jaar* by Madeleine Grynsztejn, *La ciudad hidroespacial: 500 lugares para vivir* by Gyula Kosice, and *Manchuria. Visión periférica (La máquina del tiempo)* by Felipe Ehrenberg.

You can watch videos of this performance on our Vimeo page.

## To be all

*after Felipe Ehrenberg and Madeleine Grynstejn and  
Alfredo Jaar and Gyula Kosice*

To be all  
women and  
men welcome  
with high resolution  
an interference  
of attention  
of interferences  
outside of “aah”  
rhythm sick  
a sick rhythm odd  
memorizing boxes  
memorizing dates  
direct dates  
imprecise dates  
the I a box  
the world would be pretty  
if we started  
with a target  
black and white  
resonances  
Mikhail Gorbachev  
focus on nation  
lack of nation  
a wave waving  
to the ocean  
not waving  
no hands  
the signal crossing  
the sun  
anti-magical  
crossing red intentions  
from silver  
from silver  
from my sun  
to my sun

and no north  
or south  
lost in the north  
welcome



*Video stills: courtesy The Poetry Center, San Francisco State University*

*Performed September 27, 2018*

*at San Francisco State Poetry Center*

*as part of the Tripwire Cross-Cultural Poetics Series, curated by David Buuck and Steve Dickson*

For many reasons, we took a break from the performances of the interpreted poems. We did other writing and other experiments, navigated other questions, but always with the idea of returning to this form, which we did eventually on this fall afternoon in San Francisco.

There we chose to interpret from and improvise with a book in the collection of the Poetry Center, *Naming Our Destiny* by June Jordan, and some poems by Vickie Vértiz from a multilingual anthology produced by Antena Aire as part of our Libros Antena Books imprint, titled *reciclados languages* リサイクルされた *lenguajes recycled* 言語, where the rule for submissions was no English-only poetry.

Why do we choose the texts we choose?

Why do we improvise a poem out of particular texts?

We have written before and said many times that who you choose to translate is political.

Who we choose to place in dialogue is political.

What is that dialogue saying? What is that choice saying?

Who we choose to performatively interpret also builds a web of relation, both intellectual and personal. Those combinations cross boundaries of age, race, time period, aesthetics, geography.

What critique or potential do those choices propose?

We also did a longer talk on that day about our collaborative work. This was the first time we used the name Antena Aire publicly. Both the poem and that talk are available at our Vimeo page.



## Inside this copal burning incense a system

*after June Jordan and Vickie Vértiz*

Inside this copal  
burning incense  
a system  
of archives  
jump  
jump  
I have so many  
difficulties controlling  
my emotions  
the natural order  
does not want  
pomegranate juice  
voluptuous  
brilliant  
any paper  
resplendent  
I found myself  
entering rhythmically  
unable to control  
my speaking  
flourishing tree  
girls with black bells  
I survive  
I survive  
I survive  
a voice said  
“righteous” in English  
and Sojourner said  
I’m going up  
I’m riding  
I go  
and this hell  
has made  
me hard  
but strong



## Being in the places between we don't

*After Don Mee Choi and Gabriela Torres Olivares*

Being in  
the places between  
we don't  
understand  
we don't understand  
claims the jumps  
re-jumps  
salts  
no one  
talked no one  
talked to us  
she loved  
herself anyways  
weddings happen  
in the past  
she thinks she  
doesn't belong she  
doesn't correspond it  
isn't corresponded  
to her doubt  
whatever we want  
we didn't want  
the ocean is not  
the sea the soil  
the air  
maybe a system  
without translation  
a system is not  
a wedding no one  
with a lover  
loyalty doesn't  
cross blood hands  
more more  
distances triumph  
air fixes or something  
in bed or get up

wake up  
out of bed or pain  
in shouts shouting  
undesired pain non-binary  
language this  
multi-ilarity jja!



*Image: Antena Aire*

*Performed March 2, 2019*

*in TC Tolbert and Rosie Perera's backyard*

*after a series of events in Tucson with the University of Arizona Poetry Center and the Jewish History Museum, curated by Ariel Goldberg, Diana Delgado, and Tyler Meier*

At the end of February 2019, Antena Aire was invited to Tucson to do a series of presentations with Myriam Moscona, the author of *Tela de sevoya / Onioncloth*, a book we translated collaboratively. The three of us performed at the Jewish History Museum in an event that focused on Moscona's book and its interweaving of her personal and familial histories, alongside contemplations of the history and precarious future of the Sephardic Jewish language Ladino. The following night we presented some Antena Aire projects along with translations of other work by Moscona, at the University of Arizona Poetry Center. We didn't end up having time to perform an interpreted improvised poetry experiment as we'd intended. But the next day, we performed twice for the camera, the plants, and the voluminous desert sky in our friends' backyard.

We didn't want to let the moment pass without performing this experiment. And we wanted to see what it would be like to improvise an interpretation not for a live audience, but for ourselves or for the video camera itself, in a way that felt so different from our first "just for ourselves" performances years earlier at Millay. The change in plans felt fortuitous, because we were able to switch up the ordering of languages, so that we ended up producing two poems in Spanish, which we've translated on the following pages. Here we might question our impulse to land in English for English-dominant audiences, or we might simply note, yet again, the ways that language dominance dominates even those most vibrantly critical of it.

For videos of these performances, you can visit our [Vimeo page](#).

## Amor el sonido del sonido

*a partir de Myriam Moscona y TC Tolbert*

Amor el sonido  
del sonido  
allí estando  
sin estar  
un país  
un acueducto allí  
sin hablar  
sin contarme  
estando sin estar  
una pregunta  
de visibilidad  
allí afuera  
salir para comprar  
bocas amarillas  
en el suelo  
estando sin estar  
un tiempo para estar  
con callos del borrar  
yo pienso  
yo creo  
corazón en línea  
yendo para abajo  
en la tierra  
dentro del espacio  
es infinito  
solo manos  
corazones  
el corazón del bien  
como vapor  
exuda  
piedra país  
muro país  
tacto  
utilizar regresar  
menos único  
menos

descalzo el país  
acueducto  
dicta a sus amores  
como amores amarillos  
amores



## Love the sound of the sound

*after Myriam Moscona and TC Tolbert*

Love the sound  
of the sound  
there being  
without to be  
a country  
an aqueduct there  
without speaking  
without telling me  
being without to be  
a question  
of visibility  
there outside  
to go out to buy  
yellow mouths  
on the ground  
being without to be  
a time to be  
calloused from erasing  
I think  
I believe  
heart on a line  
going down  
into the earth  
inside space  
is infinite  
only hands  
hearts  
the heart of good  
like steam  
exudes  
stone country  
wall country  
touch  
to utilize to return  
less singular  
less

barefoot the country  
aqueduct  
dictates to its loves  
like yellow loves  
loves

## Una máquina es una combinación de cuerpos

*a partir de Gabrielle Civil y Maricela Guerrero*

Una máquina es una combinación  
de cuerpos dúctiles  
resistentes disponibles  
con las manos pintadas  
que tenemos un cuerpo  
y sabor  
yo no estoy aquí  
la palabra el sabor  
de la dulzura sí  
la colmena de  
la pregunta especializada  
cada vez más cantidad de noche  
yo registro la noche migrante  
anhelo anhelo  
anhelante verano de anhelos  
figuración flotante  
por etapas  
la cara dada  
a la impropiedad maquinista  
¿quién dirige la función?  
¿es esto empleo o trabajo?  
legendario  
subjetivo  
subjuntivo  
y preocupante  
preocupando el lenguaje  
para producir un efecto  
de barca vacilante por supuesto  
en río acompañante  
cierto movimiento  
río  
máquina  
artefacto  
el hacer es una forma de amor  
puedes escucharles  
las abejas  
como se levantan como  
se caen

## A machine is a combination of bodies

*after Gabrielle Civil and Maricela Guerrero*

A machine is a combination  
of bodies ductile  
resistant available  
with painted hands  
that we have a body  
and flavor  
I am not here  
the word the flavor  
of sweetness yes  
the hive of  
the specialized question  
ever more quantity of night  
I scan the migrant night  
longing longing  
longingful summer of longings  
floating figuration  
in stages  
the face given  
to machinist impropriety  
who directs the function?  
is this employment or work?  
legendary  
subjective  
subjunctive  
and worrisome  
worrying language  
to produce an effect  
of wavering boat of course  
in accompanying river  
certain movement  
river  
machine  
artifact  
making is a form of love  
you can hear them  
the bees  
how they rise how  
they fall

## Closing

What is it to perform an impossibility?

What is it to labor when we know the goal is unattainable?

When the very terms do not allow for a “successful” outcome?

Or how does poetry allow us to understand moments of failure as moments of radiance?

Or how does this small task, necessarily ending badly, allow us to carve a space to do something together?

How does doing something together bring us into another kind of moment? Another kind of movement?

Interpreting is also an attempt at communication, an attempt to allow for relations to build between people who might not otherwise have a dialogue. What happens when a tool for legibility begins to be used for something else?

These performances insist: there is always a flame in that bridge, an ever-present fire across the length of what might join one person to another.

What might separate them.

There is always a trembling just before the bridge collapses.

What does the flame communicate?

How might we cross bridge-less?



Antena Aire is a language justice and literary experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker. Antena Aire activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit. Antena has exhibited, published, performed, organized, advocated, translated, curated, interpreted, and/or instigated with numerous groups and institutions in the U.S. and beyond. Antena Aire publishes bilingual chapbooks and pamphlets through our Libros Antena Books imprint, and collaborates with Ugly Duckling Presse on the Señal Series of Latin American literature in translation.

More information: <http://antenaantena.org/>

## TRIPWIRE PAMPHLET SERIES

1. Fel Santos, *Post Dede Kyembot*, edited by Paolo Javier & David Mason/Listening Center
2. nibia pastrana santiago, *objetos indispuestos, inauguraciones suspendidas, o nales inevitables para un casi-balle (indisposed objects, suspended inaugurations, or inevitable endings for an almost dance)*
3. The Feminist Economics Department, *Desperate Holdings (un) Real Estate: Dis-Investment Strategy*
4. Antena Aire (Jen Hofer & John Pluecker), *The Flame Through the Bridge: Notes and Transcripts from Improvized Interpreted Poem Performances, 2014-2019*
5. Cartonera Collective, *cardboard minutes // libro de caja*
6. Urban Subjects (Sabine Bitter & Helmut Weber), *Making Ruin*
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