

CuMMA – Studies in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art

Honour silence as a form of presence*

by María Villa

The absence of plot leaves the reader room to think about other things.

[...] Plots are for dead people.

[...] Everything I write, I believe instinctively, is to some extent collage. Meaning, ultimately, it is a matter of adjacent data.

—David Shields, *Reality Hunger*

This is not a student exhibition. This is a laboratory. It is a collection akin to a traveller's life in which places, times and conversations render a particular way to walk, a face, a baggage, a mixed memory, "contaminations", affections and disaffections, recurrent themes, scraps of things, objects that stick around for no apparent reason, personal sketches, letters.

Like a big table upon which participant artists have been invited to pour out their journeys, the exhibition makes up a larger geography that is only partially accessible to the curator and remotely witnessed by viewers, reflecting on the expanse of a practice: painting. An archive of sorts emerging from a chrysalis, it is the site of a longer conversation that cannot be pinned down to the table, but rather insists on wandering around from books, to films, to folk music—a thousand streets where anonymous paper planes have landed.

i.

We can probably imagine the private studio work of painters; we know what that is about. Hearing them talk lately, I have discovered that such work largely escapes our understanding in terms of concrete practices and the actual processes taking place. "The studio is between the ears", one claims. Refusing to name names, explain processes, or provide geographic origins of works on the wall, a painter-curator, Fergus Feehily, takes us around Exhibition Laboratory as if welcoming us to his studio. His curation behaves similarly to his smaller painted works: an iceberg of connota-

tions, stories, personal anecdotes. Nobody has the complete detailed map, not even him. And in that gesture comes the complexity of a creative practice that wants to be brought forward to the audience *as is, unmediated*. Confusion can be a fertile place.

We are invited to assume the role of the archaeologist inside a multilayered creative practice, a polyphony of voices brought together by Feehily, who behaves more like a conductor than a taxonomist (or a taxidermist) of contemporary painting. Whoever steps in looking for an explanation, a narrative to guide them through, may quickly end up puzzled. We are expected instead to listen openly, disarmed, to try and discern the music the constellation of works is able to produce. Only then might we find a movement in there, faced with such an array of works that we are sure to find one whose particular mystery speaks directly and satisfyingly to us. A guest from the two evenings of “Conversations in Light and Dark” put it thusly: “When the plate is on the table, the chef doesn’t come out of the kitchen to explain all they were doing in there with the food.”

Ironically, then, the floorplan that is handed out at the entrance works as a bilingual set of instructions (dimensions, names, dates, titles) inviting us, in fact, to get lost and *find something ourselves*.

‘Getting lost’ and, at the same time, ‘putting things together’, brings to mind personal processes of students and professional painters showing their works, but it is mostly a clue alluding to the process of organising the exhibition. What is it that these artists have found when getting lost? What have they put together?

As I walk around, I wonder about the curatorial decisions—the shift from doing to showing. It is the distinct feature of a laboratory to facilitate a rich process that often starts conversing, asking, wandering around topics, exploring materials. Pictorial media is pushed or led in different ways to speak as image—as painted space, object, document, and vice versa. That process, here, has stopped but hasn’t really come to an end. Halting it requires discarding, editing out the sketches, and gleaning, grasping the art apart from the missteps, the lapses, failed attempts, the mere beginnings yet to be developed. Separating the gold dust from the mud. For many artists, study and gallery spaces each entail two very different ways in which the mind functions. Once the actions and debates have settled (or are slowly fading under the rhythm of new projects and the circumstances artists find themselves in) the final traces are left. To the viewer they are ‘the art’—the tasty dish—but to the art-workers, they may only be the remnants of a dive into questions, the dead remains of the creative action. With the tidying up of the space, both a mental and a physical action is set in motion: settling thoughts in heads, naming works, labelling them, and finally perhaps, negotiating coexistence—sequencing in the white space. From this, the politics of showing, of being seen, come about. It’s presented as a collective narrative, but who tells that whole story¹? How is it told once everybody leaves? How can we read it in this space?

When you’re in the middle of a story, it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood. Like a house in a whirlwind or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard are powerless to stop it. It is only afterwards that it becomes a story at all, when you’re telling it to yourself or to someone else. (Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell*)

This text wants to provide a modest answer to the absence of that story.

ii.

Far from the Tree: acknowledging a common root, a discipline and its norms, a shared practice, these apples depart from the branch, but still reference it, are still attached to the idea of painting. They don't let go, but they want to resist it, they strive to find ways to contest it from within. They roll down the hill into freedom... How might one manage to roll (and not stop and rot, become another static tree) when headed downhill?

A painting refuses to be painting, but still has the nostalgia of the medium—as the proverb goes, “you can't have your cake and eat it too.” And yet, current invisible norms encourage, celebrate, even dictate deviation from the norm, the constant trespassing into one media from another. Here and there, artists and their audience look for the transmogrified language. Using the same vocabulary, painting wants to tell another story, speak in a different tone. Can we still recognise its voice, or are we lost in translation, completely removed from the source, alienated from the meaning, the root?

[If] we understand a relational art work to be a revision of sculpture, we encounter it differently than if we understand it to be a revision of theatre or dance. Some may not understand the work to be a revision of anything. The inclusion of an artist's body in a gallery is formally innovative to some viewers; to others, it is just bad acting. To some, the dispersal of an art practice is an intriguing “de-materialisation”; to others, it is an assembly of blocked site lines. To some, a durational experiment is tediously slow; to others, it is a meditation on the nature of human endurance. [...] One critic's sense of groundbreaking innovation is another critic's Emperor's New Clothes. Our varied responses depend upon inherited assumptions about the nature of different art forms and the social function of artistic practice more generally. Medium-specificity [...] appears in different guises across a wide variety of cross-medium experiments. It structures the perceptual apparatuses of different viewers who might disagree about what in fact they are seeing—whether it is intelligible or unintelligible, spectacular or restrained, alienating or interactive, referential or abstract, fast or slow. Medium-specificity can also have a kind of chiasmic quality as we increasingly realise that the disruption of one medium often requires a re-skilling in the techniques of another. (Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing art, supporting publics*)

Within the exhibition are the archive tables of conversations, put forward by painters and other artists, loaded with countless references for one to dive into in the search for the threads knitting this whole together. On the other hand, *Constellations* gives room for a number of works that stay inside the realm of painting, pretty close to the tree (right under, in fact), while also fitting in works which are so far removed from it I would not call them apples. In many of them, painting becomes a metaphor. Here there is no longer a rapport between what is depicted and the reality in which the viewer could expect to grasp an attempt to convey a certain mode of perception or feeling, but a media using others to comment on itself, its history, its boundaries. It is a language hijacked by other languages, by references, contaminations: pieces that both defy the definition of painting and sharply comment on it using mediums that speak of painting, and in the same gesture, go far beyond it, to a place of tension. I could comment on several of them in this respect. I have picked a few that seemed somehow crucial to me.

iii.

In the light box with “pigment plants”, no painting can be found, not even the outside color of the plants: a purple light spreads its fluorescent coat over the living specimens, keeping them alive and, ironically, hiding the red, blue, yellow and green substances they stand for. Only text is left: words that talk about pigments unseen, notions we apply to a perception that remains as impossible here as tasting blue or smelling red would be.



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(<https://cummastudies.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/maria-villa-exhibitionntextw-18-12-2017-2.jpg>)

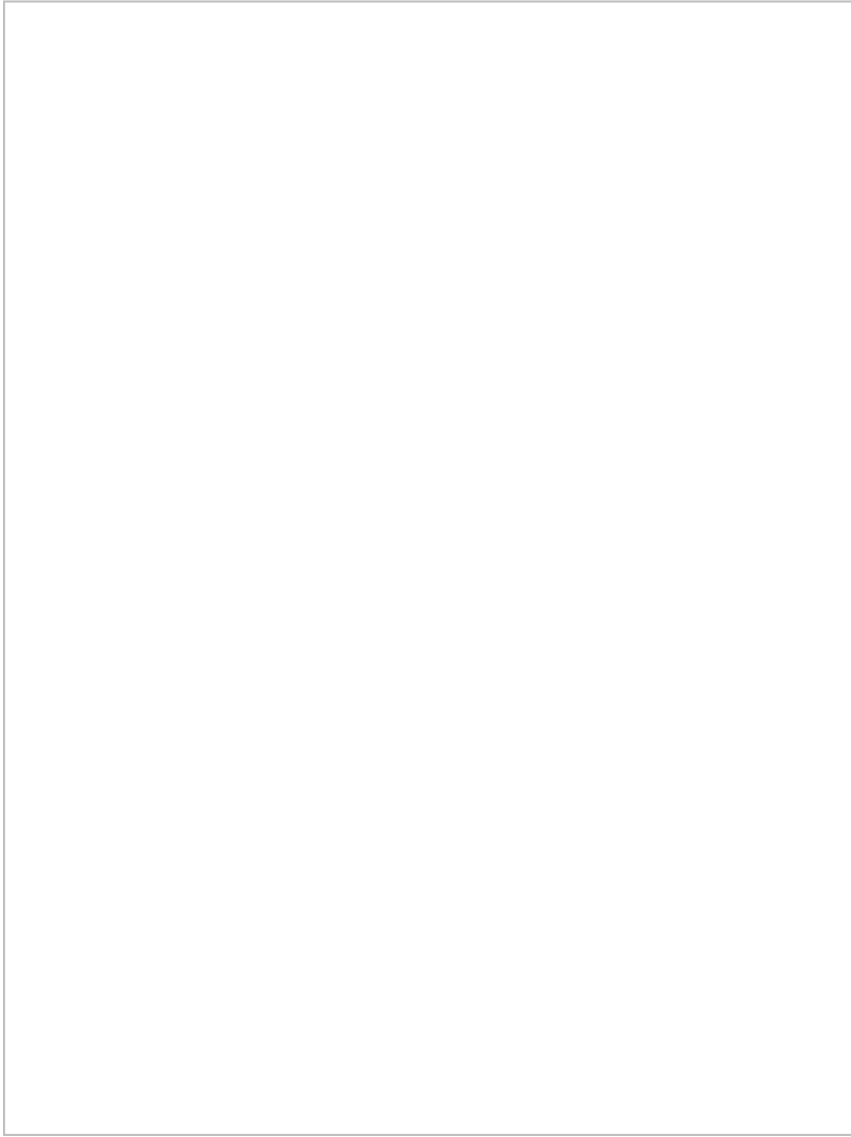
Peter Ojstersek, *Colour Plant Remix*, 2017. Image: María Villa.

Night Table, Far From the Tree students' curatorial project, 2017. Detail of the installation. Image: María Villa.

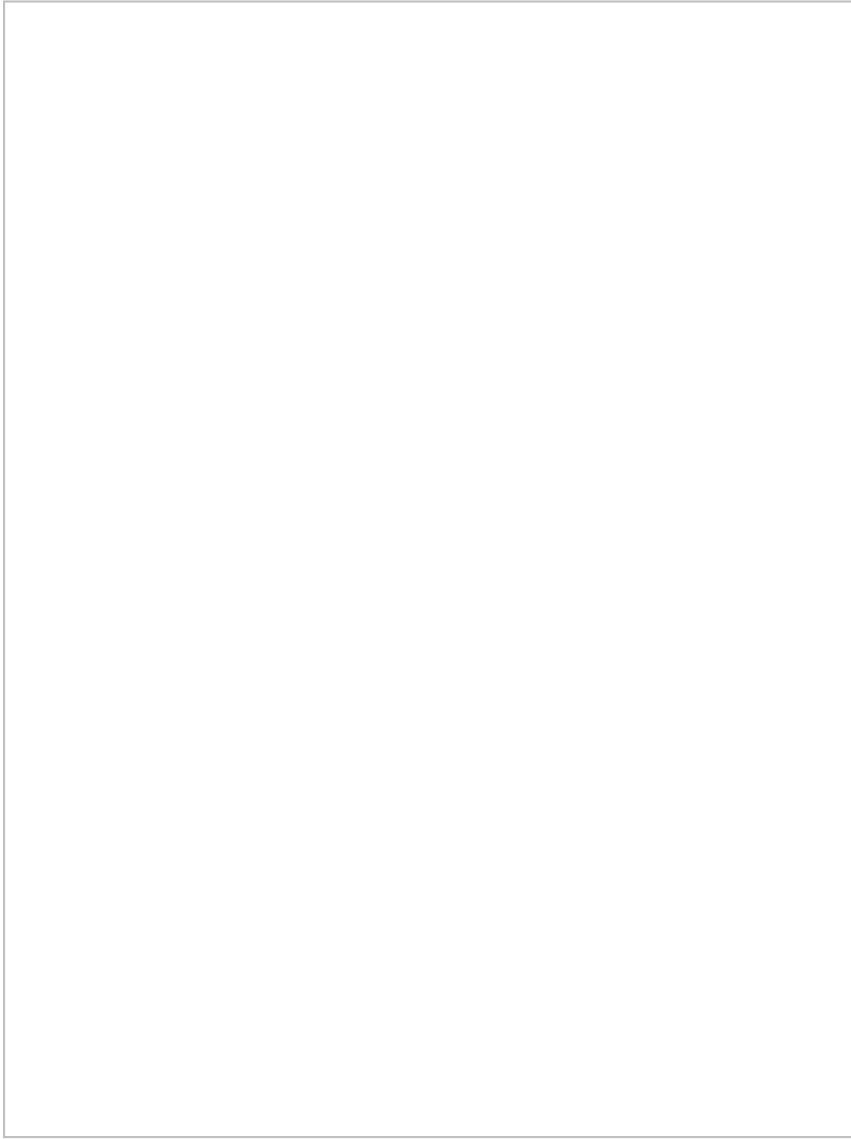
A life-size hand projected almost at the ground level, as if painlessly severed from the artist's arm in the framing of the photo slides. The tiny projector deceives the eye—you have to put your hand next to it to understand the scale. You almost want to touch that hand, like an object put away on the *Night Table* just before abandoning yourself to sleep. It holds a postcard from a trip, and then another, and another in a loop: the epitome of vicarious experience. How may one see through the eyes of a traveller? The painter reports with the brush on their visual journey. The eternal promise of art exposed in its deceit: you can't really visit the places they have been to. To what extent are most paintings in this show, in any show, just some shallow tourist postcards into the mind of the artist, a land opening so deep down but inevitably out of reach?

A book intervened with paint, glued to the false walls just on top of the postcard projector, provides a clue to this corner, which is announced as an exhibit within the exhibition (one of the most hermetic pieces in the show): it is *Life. A User's Manual*, by Georges Perec. Of all the silences within *Constellations*, the silence of this series collectively curated by art students is perhaps the most disconcerting. Not a sentence is provided to unlock the intention of this gesture. Perec's novel serves as a footnote for the connoisseurs, and points straight at the oldest trick of painting: the unique vision an artist conveys is irreparably fragmented, never fully grasped by the viewer, always escaping the frame. But the novel adds another twist: a painter refuses to give his painting to the world, even more, gives it and then dissolves it, denies the viewer a chance to peep through his eyes.

Absorbed in his play, a boy gives us his back, forgets our presence behind him. You can almost hear him talking to himself in whispers, humming. His eyes don't lose focus, his hands move efficiently, absorbed in perfect sync with the rhythm of his game. On the surface of the water mirror we are faced with a double layer of distance: that imposed by the boy's posture, and that other of time. The childhood of those older than us. Where did it go? Our own childhood is irrevocably lost, removed, and yet so present, so unreasonably ours, busy adults, incapable of focussing on our own grown-up games these days. The water blurs the already subtle traces of the brush on the canvas in such a way that, if you keep your eyes on the mirror image, you can almost feel a reflection of the actual boy playing in your presence, not just the mirror image of a representation, a false copy of the copy. On the second floor of the show *A Dressing Gown Painting* has the reverse gesture: the artist has painted both the red flowers on the gown and the folded gown on a canvas.



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<https://cummastudies.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/maria-villa-exhibitionntextw-18-12-2017-4-e1518599137256.jpg>) Ann-Sofie Claesson, *What might have been lost*, 2017. Image: María Villa.

Hannele Kumpulainen, installation view of *A Piece of Cloth*, 2008, and *A Dressing Gown Painting*, 2008.

Image: María Villa.

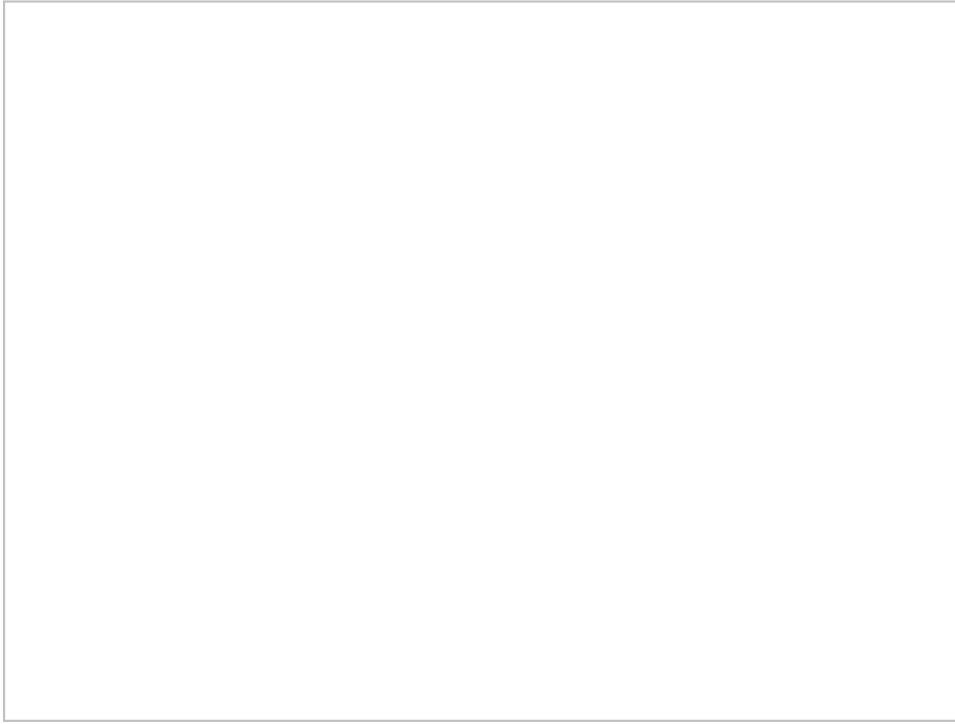
Archives, display/working tables, relics of research: the curator, musicians and artists want to tell the story of their own painting, and, at the same time, write with pictures, sound, quotes and objects pressed under glass like butterflies. These are constellations inside a large constellation, forced into a flat form to keep them still and give access to the eye. Feehily has incorporated colours into the surface of tables, in a gesture that, beyond playfulness, reveals to what extent the curator approached these as collages oscillating between visual and conceptual composition. Most of them have locked up content: What does a povera *Tin Tin* icon have to do with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*? How does a comedian interview relate to Harry Smith's paper planes? Rich for whoever was in that conversation, to the outsider they feel like rumours behind a door. If you were curious at the beginning, very soon you give up trying and move on...

Unless you have been part of that conversation somehow before. That is when it happens: in the surface, suddenly, a rabbit hole: within the text, so linear, so quiet, a vortex opens for attention—you are trapped in it.

Nynnyt. I can't even say the word, I don't know what it means when I encounter it. But in this table I start tracing a direct collective voice, no embellishment, no explanations either. The honesty to put things forward, to *manifest*: "Let's find structures that don't marginalise. Let's allow for complexity and contradictions [...] Let's be generous. Let's say stop." By no means the only possible strategy when working with an archive, this collective work provides a map to read deeper in their constellation (an index). Keywords (*horizon, focus, line of flight, perspective*) and red thread tied to objects and texts convey the collective search, the process of being together. It feels in motion under the glass, suggests without telling, invites us to join the conversation, keeps itself both utopic and down to earth. Nothing in it is predictable, nothing is settled. Manifestos are as open as they are closed.



Nynnyt, void/focus/perspective/horizon/line of flight, 2017.
Detail of the installation. Image: María Villa.



(<https://cummastudies.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/maria-villa-exhibitionntextw-18-12-2017-5.jpg>)

iv.

[...] nomads, contrary to current popular imagination, have fixed circuits and stable relationships to places; they are far from being the drifters and dharma bums that the word nomad often connotes nowadays.

—Rebecca Solnit



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Maunu Markkula, Installation view, from right to left?: *Trees in Evening Light* (n.d.), *Building* (n.d.), *The Brink of the Meadow* (n.d.), *On the Road to Alexandria* (n.d.).
From the Esko Jääsalo Collection. Image: María Villa.

On the last day of the exhibition, I learn from Feehily that Mauno Markkula is not one of his students. The paintings one sees first when entering the room belongs to a Finnish expressionist who died in 1959, an artist little known even in Finland. No date has been included in the floor plan handout for any of his works, or for himself. As I learn this, I realise we are also walking inside a constellation of generations. A Sami dress hangs on the second floor. In both cases, Feehily talks about anonymity and deep meaning, the mystery of certain arts and crafts. He sees so much potential in the unsaid, the hermetic. In fact, he regards Markkula's works as the cornerstone of the whole curatorial project of addressing contemporary painting. He extends his arms to reach a huge history of Finnish painting, as one of many tangential lines that help explore both the medium, the landscape, and painters' psyches marked by obsession and intuitive searches. In this way, the meandering trajectories suggest without pointing, bringing more richness into the show, more complexity.

I see what he means, it makes total sense. But this revelation about Markkula completely changes the character of the show for me. There is too much silence here, and in many other sections, for the actual constellation to be visible. I honestly wonder if we can still talk about curating when the curator steps back so far into the dark, leaving us alone with the works.

Throughout this process I have been thinking of a constellation and what it entails: being in the same place, but not quite. A conversation, likewise, means verbalising, finding ways to articulate ideas that cut across space, touching each other. But it can also be a series of soliloquies stretching hands, like acrobats in mid-air, wanting to sustain but also move each other, and not fall.

* From the manifesto of Alok Vaid-Menon, *Femme in Public*.

2 “Constellations arose in many ways out of a course at the Academy of Fine Arts, called Far from the Tree. The course had several iterations and directions, but common was an immersive week involving a great deal of discussion, reading, looking, listening, screenings, conversation and tea drinking. These discussions covered ideas around getting lost, putting things together, and collecting things like records, books or paper planes as Harry Smith did, with the intention to create a space to inhabit and to allow thought and feeling to move outwards in new directions, both during the course and beyond it. The exhibition seeks in a modest way to do the same.”

<https://www.uniarts.fi/en/events/thu-03082017-1201/constellations> (<https://www.uniarts.-fi/en/events/thu-03082017-1201/constellations>)

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