

Carnal Knowledge and Alienation: Lygia Clark's "Stone and Air"

MARIA EUGENIA ACHURRA
University of Cincinnati

In *Carnal Knowledge and Alienation: Lygia Clark's "Stone and Air,"* the author delves into her own war experiences, offering an introspective, phenomenological view of the former U.S. Canal Zone, its estranged and oppressive past, and its conflicting existential tensions. As a non-concretist "proposition," Clark's "Stone and Air" helps to reconstruct an existential nature of contemporary U.S. monopolizing interests in the Americas, as well as their severe impact on the Isthmus of Panama. In Clark's work, a pebble floats on top of an inflated plastic bag which Clark holds on her hands. Following her "proposition," both alienation and vertigo can be understood as authoritarian components from the spatiotemporal construct known as "Zona Del Canal." Thus, "Stone and Air" brings forth a more in-depth understanding of the functioning of the former U.S. Canal Zone and its role in the world.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1903 and 1999, the U.S. Canal Zone (or "Zona Del Canal") becomes a desirable, welcoming geopolitical location for those encompassed by its jurisdiction -and a forbidden region for citizens residing elsewhere in the Isthmus of Panama. For decades, Panamanian citizens actively protest against the former U.S. Canal Zone and its modern state of alienation, risking their lives by trespassing its chain-link fence and planting Panamanian flags on canal soil. Akin to Clark's transparent plastic bag, a chain-link fence can also superimpose its artificial manufacturing to local flesh tones and blood tints.

How to unravel Panamanian perceptions of U.S. post-colonial presence in a territory such as the Canal Zone? Following phenomenology as a method for understanding spatiotemporal dimensions in urban settings, Clark's "Stone and Air" helps to elucidate its material qualities. Paraphrasing R. Krauss, Clark qualifies her work as "proposition," "...since what was at issue... was not a function of any quality of the object itself -which was either a readymade or something

simple enough for anyone to refabricate- but resided instead in the object's manipulation..." (1) Through this "manipulation," a "proposition" aims at the thingness of things, in order to create dialogue; exchange.

To understand the binary and thingly character of Clark's "Stone and Air" -and of the former U.S. Canal Zone and its facilities- both M. Merleau-Ponty's concept of carnal knowledge and M. Heidegger's notion of equipment can be juxtaposed. On the one hand, carnal knowledge involves doing something palpable and material, yet being performed repeatedly and effortlessly such as an attitude or habit. On the other hand, equipment reveals the concrete structure of things (such as in the case of a hammer, a tool upon which we can depend for the action of hammering, or a soft pair of shoes or a cozy bed, artifacts that we use daily for walking or resting, respectively). Such things reveal an all-encompassing, material kind of insight, part of our everyday living, which is called by Heidegger as "lifeworld."

Lifeworld is what is always already there. It is soaked with meaning. As concealed existentialism, lifeworld becomes present in the carnal knowledge of a thing or phenomenon. Heidegger brings forth the example of a peasant woman, her pair of comfy boots, and her reliance on them, to the extent of forgetting she is wearing them. If the tear-and-wear of these boots opens a hole on their soles, she will whisper to her soul: "Through their absence, I miss the usefulness of my boots!" This kind of instrumental knowledge, or equipmentality, becomes a major component of the woman's lifeworld; of a world which has been materialized by a pair of boots.

Now, what about the boots from a platoon of U.S. Marines in a foreign land? Are these boots also comfy? Are they instrumental? Do they also become present as carnal knowledge?

When things get deprived of their careful, equipmental character, lifeworld lacks its authentic context, becoming an abstract target without a genuine connection towards its own materiality. Lack of authenticity points towards audiences' lack of satisfaction, resulting in serious identity struggles, as well as a loss of the foundation of the world.

Thus, Lygia Clark's "Stone and Air" defines "lifeworld" in a dialectical way. First, it exposes its instrumental nature. Then, it conceals/



Fig. 1. Lygia Clark, *Stone and Air*. 1966

unconceals its thingness, “bracketing” it and preventing it from being lost in space/time. Here, Clark’s work brings forth general attributes such as absence and desire, as well as particular conditions such as alienation and vertigo. An awareness of such notions becomes crucial for defining a Panamanian “lifeworld” with regards to the former U.S. Canal Zone.

In this context, the “Zone” can be understood as an inflamed blister in the Americas. It can be interpreted as an air bubble akin to Clark’s “Stone and Air” ready to explode at any time -and that eventually explodes during the events of January 9th, 1964, and more recently, during the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989. Even as of today, and thirteen years after total reversion of the Zone to Panama in 1999, historical and socio-political tensions are still present in the United States and Panama; tensions which at times have been poignant and ulcerated.

WHY “STONE AND AIR” AND THE PANAMA CANAL?

This question has emerged several times in the minds of those who have read my texts. However, no one has directly addressed it up to now: an attitude that probably relates to the at-times volatile, socio-political and historical relations between the U.S. and Panama.

Almost thirty years ago, my country, Panama, was rocked by severe U.S. economic sanctions that reduced our already damaged construction economy by 90%. I witnessed the desperation of many construction workers, who were confined to only the few architecture projects available around the country in order to bring home money to their families. But others were not so fortunate. As a

result, they were reduced to visiting community kitchens for sustenance. Many of us could not take the harsh conditions and fled the country into voluntary exile.

And what of the residents of these destroyed buildings? Their experiences were more theatrical. At the end of Operation “Just Cause” (a “politically-correct” label provided by former President George Bush to the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama), more than 3,000 were dead, and 3,000 were left homeless. As in J. Habermas’s Legitimation Crisis, although there was a formal democracy established, it took years to overcome the building crisis.

After experiencing these effects for years, I gathered my own experiences and decided to focus on phenomenology and architecture in order to explain this repressive condition. Moreover, I decided to focus my research on the principal motive of this situation: the socio-political, historical relations between the U.S. and Panama, reflected on the spatial construct known to us as the former “U.S. Canal Zone.” Although reversion to Panama was finalized in December 1999, our idiosyncrasy as Panamanians has been directly and permanently altered by U.S. culture and economy.

In other words, the Panama Canal becomes an open wound between the United States of America and Panama on the monopoly of the Western Hemisphere and its strategic economic policies. Thus, in order to discuss our shared business on Canal property, can we either use art or architecture as a kind of reverse discourse? Will that sort of discussion put more salt on the wound? Or, will it instead consolidate endearing memories from our common past?

NEO-CONCRETISM AS REVERSE DISCOURSE

At this point, a few questions emerge. What kind of work is “Stone and Air”? Is this a shallow, passive artwork that involves a merely physical and intellectual process? Or, does Clark’s work intend to create embracing moments of thought, capable of drawing together past, present, and future experiences into single, transparent instances? Is this work capable of showing images that are more empathic or appealing to our human contexts; i.e., more fleshly or corporeal? Can “Stone and Air” become a kind of discourse capable of projecting Heidegger’s modes of being, such as Being-alongside-the-world and Being-with-Others? With regards to the former U.S. Canal Zone, can “Stone and Air” help describing its spatiotemporal elements? And, as neo-concretist “reverse discourse,” can “Stone and Air” help elucidating either an American or a Panamanian national memory?

Neo-Concretism emerges in Brazil between the 1950’s and 1960’s as a way to counteract the influence of Swiss architect/artist Max Bill (1908-1994) and his “Concrete Art” tendency. For Bill, a concept or work of art relies on a scientific approach to human intellect for its production. At the end of his career, Bill states, “...I know better that mathematics are only a part of the methods to be adapted for the regulation of so-called works of art. I know that a concept has to conform to its inner organization and its visual existence. This means that a concept and the finally executed work have to be a

unity. This unity is the result of the logical approach in the solution of the problem and its realization.” (2)

To oppose “Concrete Art” and its precepts, and to open new artistic fields, in 1966 Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988) represents “Stone and Air,” a neo-concretist “proposition.” “Neo-Concretism” aims at perception, existential reconfiguration, and general thinking, in order to create dialogue; exchange. For neo-concretists, a work of art derives from the act of creation itself (3), instead of being regulated or dictated, paraphrasing Bill, using mathematical calculations and logical deductions for its expression. As an act of creation, a neo-concretist “proposition” engages spectators/active participants into duration/time; that is, an “event” (an instant when past, present, and future become evident as authentic understanding). In “Stone and Air,” a pebble floats on top of an inflated plastic bag that Clark holds on her hands (Fig. 1). Together, plastic bag and stone become a tangible proposition where tissue and humanity interact as carnal knowledge; touch and flesh.

Through Clark’s “proposition,” transparent, collective meanings can be inferred from its actual body of information. As a result, a neo-concretist “proposition” defines a different kind of revolutionary, seditious ‘beauty;’ beauty that is “oppositional, challenging, non-conformist” (4). After decades of belligerent contentions within modern art between the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘sublime,’ beauty can be related again to political ‘bodies;’ to such contentious issues as sustainability, gender diversity, and outsider art. Thus, as a neo-concretist phenomenon, Clark’s “Stone and Air” introduces a kind of discourse in which beauty re-emerges as an artistic, politically- and socially- correct concept, with both supporters and opponents.

REVERSE DISCOURSE AND E. SAID’S ORIENTALISM

Following E. Said’s *Orientalism* (5), between 1903 and 1999 references to a fictitious, remote Panamanian idiosyncrasy are idyllically manipulated via U.S. control on the Canal Zone. Thus, such terms as “exotic” and “haunting” demand a U.S. half-blinded audience; an audience that always exerts North American single-sided opinions on Latin America. This can be understood as an alienated presence of the former U.S. Canal Zone in the Western Hemisphere. In other words, Said’s *Orientalism* implies North American expansionist ideals. To spread its wings and lay out its realities of domination, U.S. reinterprets Latin American beliefs, traditions, languages, and ways of thought through its own epistemologies.

Whenever such “careful” words as “emancipation” and “enlightenment” are highlighted by E. Said’s humanist dialogue, human rights and its struggle for equality and justice are also invoked. Thus, shall Said’s discourse imply a state of conflict while bringing forth such terms as “fractious”? In other words, and to some extent, aren’t we all in a state of conflict for questioning the status quo?

For many Latin American scholars, Said’s concept of *Orientalism* implies the presence of a phantasm from a world that never existed; a powerful, hegemonic hallucination from Western society. As a fantasy, its possibilities as a romantic, exotic world ready to be

possessed by its owner, explosively clashes with real Latin American interests. Thus, such binary oppositions as “The United States”–“Panama” become so pervasive, to the point of igniting their lesser halves into protests and furthermore, war.

In this context, following M. Heidegger’s concept of “care” and M. Foucault’s “reverse discourse,” E. Said’s understanding of “humanism” opens up temporal and existential horizons that encompass concern, responsiveness, and commitment. On the one hand, as Heidegger’s “care,” humanism can be understood as being anticipatory and circumspective. On the contrary, in his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault refers to a “reverse discourse,” which involves an awareness of repression, emotion, and inspection of memories. “(It)... began to speak in its own behalf... often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (6).

Thus, as reverse discourse, “Stone and Air” becomes a work of art that engages audiences with a fleshly, corporeal character ready to touch/be touched. Using its instrumental attributes, “Stone and Air” becomes a useful tool for awakening collective “moments of vision.”

Theorists differ about the exact role that “reverse discourse” plays. Some theorists resist the idea that functions of “reverse discourse” can be inverted because they consider it a misleading way to conceive the evolution of humankind. They believe it best in starting fresh and considering public needs as the bottom line.

Our standpoint views as utopian a clean, fresh start. By denying the presence of active promoters and weak audiences, we oversimplify every kind of repressive condition. To unconceal/conceal the understanding of our past, those involved must be actively present. Thus, all precedents become crucial. Here, reverse discourse over a didactic neo-concretist “proposition” such as “Stone and Air,” its spatiotemporal relationships and shared symbolic contents, becomes more rewarding.

An authentic reverse discourse is defined by mortals/humans and their lifeworld. As a phenomenological attribute, reverse discourse reveals a circumspective, material kind of insight, part of our everyday living. It relies on things that are connected to emotions, things to which humans are accustomed to. Through its random, entropic character, both equipmentality and carnal knowledge become redefined.

“STONE AND AIR” AND CARNAL KNOWLEDGE

Carnal knowledge involves doing something palpable and material, yet being performed repeatedly and effortlessly such as an attitude or habit. This habitual, customary quality of flesh is etymologically related to the Latin verb *habitare*, to reside, to dwell. Dwelling deals with what is emotional and familiar to spectators; with states of mind where they can linger or tarry on (such as deep, collective memories); with particular caresses, aromas, whispers, and shadows where attention keeps attracted or suspended and that evoke a defined spirit of a place. For Norberg-Schulz, a place is a concrete reality humans have to face and come to terms in their daily lives (7).

In "Stone and Air," place defines the proposition in carnal, existential words such as softness and roundness.

In this context, "Stone and Air's" material and formal constituents interact with both artists and their audiences. Clark's work evokes and conceals its thingness or materiality. By defining itself as a thing, the work discerns matter (hyle) from form (eidos). Form (place) becomes the display and function of the matter (work of art).

Also, material and formal qualities from Clark's "Stone and Air" are being preceded by a phenomenological discernment that justifies their existence: their use or equipmentality. As a circumspective, material kind of insight, equipmentality reveals the tangible structure of things (such as in the case of a hammer, a soft pair of shoes or a vivid color), as well as reflections evoked by them – e.g., hammering, walking or painting, respectively. "All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word" (8).

As carnal, corporeal attribute, equipmentality invokes the presence of a sense of touch. Through equipmentality, works of art acquire flesh; they become "human," and therefore, "authentic." Thus, Clark's work becomes a human convector; it embodies carnal knowledge. This kind of knowledge is continuum or means of communication instead of barrier or obstacle. Carnal knowledge emerges as the most relevant component of artists/audiences and the work, opening new exchange venues to experiencing outsider art.

Through its equipmental character, "Stone and Air" defines itself as being authentic inclusiveness. By putting aside comparative abstractions and inauthentic intentions, the work opens grades of nearness around artists/works/audiences in a myriad of poignant and direct choices. As touching and being touched simultaneously, artists/audiences become "touching subjects;" that is, part of the world by which they are being surrounded (9). Through carnal knowledge, art never conceals reality, and when the work blossom through its own openness, its flesh flourishes as the foundation of the artist's/audience's world.

Also, flesh transforms itself into the surface of the artist's/audience's bodies: through their "envelopes" or "outer selves," their bodies measure the world that unfolds beyond their limits. It is through their bodies that either artist or visitor experience touch. In other words, the artist's/audience's bodies fluctuate as carnal pivots between what is known and what is unknown to them. Carnal knowledge allows them to move inside and outside their own "envelopes," following their orientation as point of departure. Thus, instead of moving as automata, propelled by cause and effect, or paraphrasing M. Merleau-Ponty, as being measured by facts or sum of facts, the artists/audiences throw themselves into the artwork through their primal upbringing. (10).

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, such places as the former U.S. Canal Zone can become materialized/concretized into our own corporeal experiences, becoming catalysts for engagement. According to him, "...my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived)... this flesh of my body is shared with by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world... they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping --- this also means: my body is not only perceived among others, it is the mesurant (mesurant) of all..." (11)

This is carnal knowledge.

"STONE AND AIR" AND ALIENATION

Following such attributes as carnal knowledge and spirit of place, Clark's "proposition" also shows how alienated non-objects (bag, stone, air, and hands) hold themselves together, sharing common tension and gravity. Alienation can be understood regarding a particular non-object segregated from a previous position or location. For Heidegger, alienation, along with temptation (fomenting hope or desire for a futile cause), tranquillizing (lobotomizing; pacifying for a "just cause"), and entanglement (manipulating the media during a time of war; hiding civilian casualties, and creating a confusing atmosphere), constitutes the kind of being known as "falling" (decline; deterioration). "Falling" takes for granted our everyday existence without questioning our daily activities, flushing them into the oppressed flow of the world. Together, plastic bag, air, and hands work as a glove that prevents the rock from falling back to the floor and mixing with the rest of the alienated world that is struggling to survive. Clark's "proposition" is both didactic and self-explanatory: the stone opens a field for its own descent and becomes alienated by each spectator.

For those under control, their alienation evokes a sense of absence. Their falling space is null, void; tacit. As a result, Panamanian citizens compensate this absence with a desire to obtain that what is forbidden to them: sovereignty in the Isthmus. By releasing its centrifugal force, awareness of this repression deconstructs stagnant alienation into "reverse discourse." This way, emotional bounds cause a rupture of their abstract, rational modes of control and surveillance. In other words, the forbidden "Zone" becomes attached to the Panamanian psyche as memory of power, and desire prevails over repression as consequence of abrupt denial from those in control.

The word "informe," also defined by Bataille in Documents, is related to the mechanics of fall; that is, "...to undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its "proper" form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless, as though it were a spider or an earthworm crushed underfoot" (12). Since baseness is related to the rotation from the vertical to the horizontal axis, it is akin to photographic mechanisms achieved by surrealist orientations (surrealists thought of photography as a "carnal" medium). Thus, one of the purposes of the "informe" and of "falling" is to rotate verticality 90 degrees into a horizontal orientation, that can evoke origins of humankind, developing deeper understanding for the tactile attributes of the floors and grounds where we crawl, walk, and are laid down to rest.

Listening to 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature winner Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," Clark's "proposition" becomes alienated as follows:

"How does it feel

How does it feel

To be without a home

Like a complete unknown

Like a rolling stone?" (13)

Following this kind of alienation, Americans can use their own propositions to obliterate Panamanian memories. Under these circumstances, propositions can transform their elements into such isolated non-objects as the parts of a machine or the components of "Stone and Air." By eventually depriving artists/audiences from such means of communication as carnal knowledge (touch; flesh), this alienation can throw audiences into the "they" (14); into oppression (a result of the abuse of power; expressed in Clark's "proposition" by the stone's weight, or by Bill's "Concrete Art" influence).

Until the late 1970's, when the former U.S. Canal Zone undertakes a progressive reversion to Panama, Panamanians can only gaze at the canal and its infrastructure through chain-link fences and checkpoints that indicate: Do Not Trespass. Thus, more than causing a passive acceptance from those under control, this alienation brings forth a quest for sovereignty. Instead of a respectful, amicable relationship, an intermittent, diagonal tension emerges in the space between the bodies that get closer to the "Zone" and the bodies that avoid contact (those inside the "Zone"). Here, the unity of opposites, more than offering synthesis or reconciliation, sets out a permanent state of conflict. With regards to such tensions, alienation can also become turbulent (a tumultuous condition, anarchy, or lack of satisfaction).

Questions arise at this moment. Does an American nationalistic identity from a colonial past become assimilated by Panamanian culture? If this is the case, can this assimilated identity become manifest as reverse discourse via Panama's quest for sovereignty?

"Stone and Air" and the Canal Zone

"Stone and Air" becomes a phenomenological tool to explain the alienation of the former U.S. Canal Zone. It becomes useful to describe the fluctuating and tumultuous socio-political relations between Panama and the United States of America between 1903 and 1999, years during which the North American superpower occupies and controls the Central American waterway. Due to obsolete and unilateral treaties, Panama's right to enter the Zone is banned for decades by those in control of the waterway and its complementary installations. The U.S. Canal Zone is then wrapped up with chain-link fences; guarded with military bases and checkpoints. Withdrawn from the foundation of its world, the former U.S. Canal Zone becomes an artificial limb in the middle of the jungle; an air-filled plastic bag. This socio-political and geographical alienation prevails in the old Zone for over 90 years; an arrangement that, as

years go by, becomes obsolete for both nations and is deposited in 1977 by a bilateral new set of treaties.

Like a foreign object inside an eyelid, the former U.S. Canal Zone exerted alien pressure on the Isthmus of Panama and was improperly marginalized from the rest of the country. The 1903 Panama Canal Treaty, named Hay-Bunau Varilla after its co-signers, John Milton Hay, U.S. secretary of state, and French engineer Phillipe Bunau-Varilla, first Panamanian foreign minister to the U.S., was never signed by a Panamanian and offered poor economic remuneration to the Central American nation for the use of the waterway and the immediate adjacent area. This treaty also stipulated continuous U.S. presence in Panama. The former U.S. Canal Zone, then, occupied the position of the inflated plastic bag; an inflamed blister in the Americas; an air bubble that could explode at any time (and that eventually exploded during the events of January 9th, 1964, and more recently, during the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama, or Operation "Just Cause"). The full plastic bag was expected to be stagnant; uncritical of its own condition. Who would dare to re-appropriate, to reinterpret, and to transform the commodities established by the hands? Besides, an emotion linked the proposition to the hands: fear. In this context, the bag neglected its own expressiveness and privacy, and dispassionately observed its own fate and destruction to the hands that held the "proposition;" to the hands that caused pain and profound loss of life and self-esteem.

"Stone and Air" shares the same spatiotemporal arrangement as the Isthmus of Panama to the former U.S. Canal Zone: following their analogous sociological, geographical and historical settings, both become "political" and "non-political" at the same time. For instance, the pebble can symbolize the Isthmus, struggling to overcome hardship and gravity. Clark's hands work as the banks of the Canal, as well as the position of the United States of America as a superpower. Between Clark's hands, blossoms the "proposition," representing the Canal, its installations and adjacent areas. The components of "Stone and Air" have interchangeable roles: at any particular moment, the pebble can symbolize either the waterway or the proposition.

At this point, can we relate Clark's "proposition" to the former U.S. Canal Zone? On the one hand, as a work of engineering that "works," builders of the Panama Canal follow an imperialist, American expansionist Augenblick, or "moment of vision" from the early twentieth century. "When resolute, Dasein has brought itself back from falling, and has done so precisely in order to be more authentically 'there' in the 'moment of vision' as regards the Situation which has disclosed." (15)

On the other hand, and also from Heidegger, "(l)etting something be encountered is primarily circumspective; it is not just sensing something, or staring at it." (16) In other words, after reverting to Panama, such unconcealed phenomena as the former U.S. Canal Zone demands a call-for-action from its new users; a personal disposition that demands a new reverse, resolute "moment of vision," in order to re-envision its ever-present "god": the Panama Canal.

"STONE AND AIR" AND ITS SPATIOTEMPORAL DIMENSIONS

What kind of attraction keeps together the inflated plastic bag and the stone? Between both non-objects, an intermittent, diagonal tension prevails, produced by the space between the object that gets closer and the object that avoids contact. A desire to bring apart plastic bag and stone is present in "Stone and Air," akin to the former U.S. Canal Zone motto "The Land Divided – The World United." In an invisible, but immediate way, both non-objects (stone and plastic bag) are separated by the same space: the provocative space where any physical contact will cause a tearing reaction (the plastic bag can lose its air at the slightest pinch; the pebble can fall to the floor at the slowest beat.) Because of this, each time a balloon explodes, bullets or rockets echo within our bloodstream.

As the former U.S. Canal Zone, the air contained by the plastic bag is withdrawn from its external spatiotemporal condition; from carnal knowledge or the foundation of its world. Through their own flesh, spectators try to overcome the bag's alienation, bouncing the stone on the bag's soft and smooth surface, similar to human skin, and finding at times a sweet spot where the pebble can rest due to its weight. The bag's transparency allows tones of flesh to penetrate the "proposition," concealing its artificial nature.

Through air passage, the plastic bag "breathes," it is "human," and therefore, "authentic." Thus, Clark's "proposition" becomes a convector; a cathartic "event." Is the air contained by the bag necessarily a sign of its authenticity, or merely stagnant air, like helium in a birthday party?

Crucial to "Stone and Air's" act of creation, the act of breathing is described by Clark as follows:

"Fullness. I am overflowing with meaning. Each time I breathe, the rhythm is natural, fluid. I have become aware of my 'cosmic lungs.' I penetrate the world's total rhythm. The world is my lung. Is this fusion death? Why does this fullness have the taste of death? I am so incredibly alive... How to connect these two poles always?" (17)

Looking at the stone, does it necessarily imply alienation or oppression? Does it draw us back to nature? Can "falling" overcome gravity? Where does alienation between stone and air start? Where does it end? What can be expected in between plastic, latex, skin, blood, or human secretions –paraphrasing Clark, is this the way to connect "those two poles" (stone and air)? How to avoid relinquishing power or surrendering to the forces of the world – for instance, what if the size of the pebble is insignificant to that of the bag? How much air or pressure is needed to make the plastic bag explode – i.e., what if the stone is replaced by a larger, heavier rock? Will the proposition exist without air? Will it survive without a plastic bag or a stone?

Circa 1966, Clark re-presents "Stone and Air" for the first time. After that event, one can reproduce any number of air-filled plastic bags, topped with a pebble and placed on spectators' hands. Thus, is originality akin to authenticity? What makes a proposition "authentic": being the first in a sequence of events? Is authenticity akin to being a thing in itself: a thing composed of air, plastic bag, stone,

and hands; that bounces, has weight and light plumpness; that rests upon another as a child on a sibling's arms and is cruelly betrayed; something (such as an alienated country) that experiences strict economic and political sanctions; something (such as a corpse inside a big plastic black bag) buried in a mass grave, and so on?

DEFINITION OF VERTIGO

Air, plastic bag, hands and stone also share opposing forces as non-objects. The sense of vertigo is also a main element of Clark's "proposition" and is related to carnal knowledge. It has several components, among them, the awareness of fear as a repressive emotion, and the careful inspection of memories. First, the perception of fear, exerted by the spectator's/active participant's hands, is crucial for overcoming power – this awareness brings about a post-colonial arrangement. Second, a careful inspection of memories allows spectators to experience the proposition fully, as well as to disregard those in control.

Time grants thinking of past rebellions and wars the ability to lose intensity and weight. When referring to Clark's "proposition," time allows the pebble the power of gaining gravity and losing its ability to bounce on an air-filled plastic bag. This apparent contradiction between dissipation of strength and strengthening of gravity brings forward the relevance of the sense of vertigo. When spectators become aware of the swirling, turbulent effect of vertigo, their corporeality gets disoriented, falling from their rigid, vertical status into a convulsive, ecstatic state of mind. In "Corpus Delicti," R. Krauss exemplifies vertigo through a photographic machine as follows:

"There is a device, then, that produces this image, a device that the camera makes simple: turn the body or the lens; rotate the human figure into the figure of fall. The camera automates this process, makes it mechanical. A button is pushed, and the fall is the rest." (18)

VERTIGO AND WAR

How to define the concept of vertigo? What influence does it have on dismantling the former U.S. Canal Zone as a geopolitical construct? Is this vertigo determined by national identity and vice versa? If so, what kind of role does modernization play in current definitions of vertigo? Of national identity?

Similar to the spirit of place, which acts upon what is familiar to spectators, the sense of vertigo promotes personal emotions, increasing the variety of distinctions between memories (signifiers) and images (signifieds) and allowing propositions to last longer as personal experiences. The sense of vertigo extends to spectators the ability to contribute to an event or "proposition."

January 9th, 1964. After months of public demonstrations for what could be understood as an inadequate acknowledgment of sovereignty, Panamanian students crossed the chain-link fence of the Canal Zone. Their mission was simple: as they planted Panamanian flags on Canal soil, they demanded the Panamanian sovereignty, blemished by the Hay-Bunau Varilla treaties, of 1903. The student protest turned into a wild riot between Panamanian civilians and American military police. Due to the number of casualties (a total of

22), and for considering unjustified the intervention of American military police, the Panamanian government broke diplomatic relations with the United States of America for three months. As a result of these occurrences, "...the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, requested the Panamanian flag to be hoisted in all schools of the Canal Zone, along with the American flag, and later named special representatives in a Panamanian-American commission that would structure new agreements on the Canal." (19)

In what instant does vertigo start between a Panamanian high school student named Ascanio Arosemena and the rifle of an unknown American soldier? What keeps Ascanio Arosemena from crossing alive the barbed wire and chain-link fence of the U.S. Canal Zone on January 9th, 1964? Is it prohibition, rejection, or anticipation? What keeps the stone outside the plastic bag? Can the bag be opened without losing all (or some of) the contained air in order to allow the stone to penetrate it?

Thirty-five years later, something becomes evident: that vertigo gravitates in circular, cyclic movements:

Panama. December 20th, 1989. Just Cause. Blood chases her flesh during the invasion's state of anarchy. From her window, she sees a troubled man, thrown to the sidewalk after nationalistic paramilitary snatch his brand new car in the middle of the night. A few miles away, her brother, an orthopedic surgeon, is stopped during the curfew at a checkpoint for "driving too fast." His face is crushed to the ground by the boot of an American MP as being handcuffed; then he is detained for several hours.

A few hours later, she experiences her own vertigo, thrown onto the floor of her bedroom, as an American "Apache" helicopter fires a nearby target. During the crossfire, lying on the floor for an hour, she feels life is worthless: her bedroom is her haven, and its tranquility is violently disrupted; desacralized.

The following morning, browsing the morning paper, she sees photographs of the first civilian casualties, thrown into pools of blood at a Panamanian morgue that has maximized its capacity. One of them is the body of a four-year-old girl, wearing a birthday cotton dress. She can still remember the whiteness of the child's dress and the tender arms and legs of her fragile figure, appropriately extended on the floor. In the picture, a defined boundary is marked between the paleness of the child's corpse and the deep tint of blood; between broken dreams and death. Since that moment, carnal knowledge defines her daily horizons.

The photograph has disappeared from all records: it is easier to keep it clean; to deny children casualties in order to justify and applaud future military confrontations. Children war images are corrosive, pervasive. What kind of war is this? Does martyrdom come in small coffins? Is the girl's death preventable? Or, is her innocence as dirty as war can be?

Therefore, does foreign penetration to Panama (such as that of the U.S. Army and Marines during the 1989 invasion) involve liberation,

freedom? Or, will it imply a different kind of alienation: an existential alienation learned by previous oppressors?

Going back to Heidegger, what kind of boots does "Stone and Air" imply: peasant boots? Or boots from a post-colonial past? Are these boots made for walking?

CONCLUSIONS

Both the Panama Canal and its buildings were conceived and erected under the lead of American expansionist visionaries, who rested their ideals on the use of mammoth machinery and logistics. For the sake of progress, and in order to open the new ditch or give birth to new public and housing complexes, many Panamanian towns were either flooded or erased from the map. Thus, since its early days, the American corporation called "Panama Canal Commission" had placed its trust on short-term profits. The "land divided/world united" slogan had enough intensity to create an American colony in a foreign land, and a severe identity struggle in the minds of all Panamanians. (During the negotiations for the 1977 Canal Treaties, President Jimmy Carter suggested that the United States "should stop treating Panama as a puppy dog on a leash, with the U.S. at the other end of the leash.") (20)

Even as of today, and thirteen years after the former U.S. Canal Zone reverts to Panama, an intervention of US troops in Panama is being condoned by neutrality clauses of the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Treaties, in case that "perpetual operations of the canal become jeopardized." This was the case in 1989 of Operation "Just Cause," an overwhelming invasion of Panama that, more than putting Noriega out of power, puts in jeopardy tenths of thousands of lives of innocent Panamanian civilians in the middle of the crossfire. According to Human Rights, more than 3,000 Panamanians are killed during the 1989 invasion. More than an attempt to bringing democracy to Panama, "Just Cause" becomes an immense deploy of then-state-of-the-art American military weaponry; from sophisticated "Apache" helicopters and Humvees to infamous artifacts that at a "click" would disintegrate human bodies into oozing matter.

As a hegemonic structure, Western power does not imply any understanding but that of possession, of entitlement, of ownership, and following Said, of domination.

Meanwhile, in Panama, memories of an oppressive past are still fresh. Our past still calls forth what is already there: a pair of hands that hold tight an inflated plastic bag and on top of it, a stone.

ENDNOTES

1. Bois, Yve-Alain and Krauss, Rosalind (1997). *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 158.
2. Henry Pendergast, Sara and Pendergast, Tom. 2002. *Contemporary Artists*. Detroit: St. James Press, 179.
3. Asbury, Michael. 2005. "Neoconcretism", in *UECLAApedia*. Colchester, U.K.: University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art.
4. Prettejohn, Elizabeth. 2005. *Beauty and Art, 1750-2000*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 194.
5. Said, Edward (1994). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

ENDNOTES (CONT.)

6. Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon, Vol. 1, 101.
7. Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1980. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 5.
8. Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 46.
9. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 133-134.
10. Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., 139.
11. Ibid, 248-249.
12. Krauss, Rosalind, and Livingston, Jane. 1985. *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*. Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 64-65.
13. Dylan, Bob. 1967. "Like a Rolling Stone," in *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*. New York: Columbia Records.
14. Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 223.
15. Heidegger, op. cit., H328.
16. Ibid, H137.
17. Bois, Yve-Alain. 2001. *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 161.
18. Krauss and Livingston, op. cit., 60.
19. Castillero, Ernesto. 1989. *Historia de Panamá*. Panamá: Ministerio de Educación, 271.
20. Conaway, James. "Zoning Out" (November/December 1998). *Preservation*. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation.