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Oscar Muñoz:
Intentos /Attempts

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Oscar Muñoz, *Seis Intentos (Biografías)*, 2002-2019 Single-channel video 4:3
installation / mini projection with sound, Video: 14 min (detail)

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Oscar Muñoz's Intentos (Attempts): Process "With the Sound of Its Own Making"

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First of all, I emphasize that my works are not necessarily defined a priori by a fixed and clear idea, but are subject to change by the manipulations, trials, and attempts that precede them, meaning that physical experience with materials and experimentation with mechanisms largely define or alter what might be called definitive works. Oscar Muñoz, *Intentos*, 2020¹

In 1961, American artist Robert Morris created an ingenious work he titled simply *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. This unadorned wooden cube is accompanied by a three and a half-hour recording of the sounds produced during its construction—sawing, hammering, planing, sanding, etc. By deeming the artwork and its fabrication process of equal esthetic value, Morris dispelled the myth of the artist-genius, revealing artistic creation to be a somewhat tedious affair: "There's information and there's the object; there's the sensing of it; there's the thinking that connects to process. It's on different levels. And I like using those different levels."²

More than half a century later, Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz (Popayán, 1951) similarly approaches art-making on all of "those different levels. His *Intentos (Attempts)* series exhibits an illustration of process akin to Morris's own. These artworks lay bare the mechanical structures of some of his finished, polished pieces to reveal the process behind works that themselves posit process itself as an artistic act. As art historian Yve-Alain Bois queried about that of another American artist, painter Robert Ryman: "Isn't it enough to describe and analyze not the process itself, but the process of the process?"³ The "process of the process" in Muñoz's *Intentos* series illustrates not only its conceptual underpinnings, but innovative processual strategies that situate these works in a broader context. The *Intentos* are not truly only "attempts," but rather artworks in their own right, experimentation with medium and method that privileges process over product.

In these *Intentos*, Muñoz takes his chosen media apart to see how it works from the inside out, then reconstructs it from ground zero in experimenting with his desired effects. This approach is intricate-

ly connected to his pivotal process of deconstructing photography. Over the course of six decades of artistic practice, Muñoz has radically reinvented the medium, creating hybrid works that splice photographic processes with drawing, painting, print-making, installation, video, and sculpture, as well as interactive works. Or, in his words, in all of his diverse works, he is "invariably employing the photographic act and its chemical nature as both reference and metaphor."⁴ Connected to this assertion are integral, intertwined themes: the very transience of images, which he relates to the fragility of memory and the precariousness of life itself—and the human impossibility to defend against the impermanence of all three. Adopting photography as a tool to be deconstructed and made into metaphor, he compels us to reconsider how memory itself is made into meaning through works predicated on process.

Images that evade permanence and evoke the ineffable nature of memories that escape our grasp reflect Muñoz's assertion that "in every piece, the conflict between image and medium is a metaphor for the impossibility of grasping, retaining, and containing."⁵ This description is especially apt for Muñoz's *Intentos*, displayed using small projectors that foster intimate encounters. His 2001-2002 video *6 Intentos (Biografías) [6 Attempts (Biographies)]* is founded on images of anonymous Colombians from the Instantáneas Panamericanas photo studio archive the artist purchased in the late 1970s. In this series of videos, we watch Muñoz silk-screen a photographic face in charcoal dust upon a sink full of water then pull quickly away as the image slowly curls down the drain and dissipates into disfigured black fragments. He repeats this action again and again, trying new faces, new densities of charcoal dust—these few variables that exist for the work's realization. But he deems the video of the process of this process of experimentation, which in fact constitutes a performative act, as valid as an artwork in itself as the resulting final *Biografías* video installation.

In the definitive five-channel version, large 128-by-128-cm images projected on the floor display charcoal faces disappearing down swirling drains and then gradually recomposing—brief "biographies" of individuals who were caught on camera half a century ago. In their short evocative resurrection, these lost souls are granted new virtual life cycles—birth, death, and rebirth—creating emotional experiences for viewers based on the very fragility of the image as an allusion to the fragility of life.

The materials Muñoz most often employs—light, water, fire, and dust—are cosmic elements that supersede organic life cycles, but he applies them to a fundamentally human dimension. His works evoke concepts that we all experience differently over the course of our lives, especially memory, amnesia, identity, and the transience of life. His 2006 *Hombre de arena (Intento) [Sand Man (Attempt)]* adds a rare touch of levity. A naked animated man crawls laboriously out of the sea, gradually gaining the shore, only to be washed away by the tide. In the *Intento*, the video is actually projected on sand, an example of Muñoz's continuous play with the intersection of real and virtual elements in his video work. Muñoz classifies this work as an *Intento* because the final video is “a recording with higher definition and a change of format.”⁶ Yet this stand-alone version illustrates the trials and errors of the cumulative process of creating the process of what would become the final work.

Muñoz's 2004 *Intentos 1 y 2 (Re/trato y Proyecto para un memorial) [Attempts 1 and 2 (Portrait/I Try Again and Project for a Memorial)]* perhaps best illustrates this experimentation with process that ultimately becomes reshaped into a different process through the “physical experience with materials and experimentation with mechanisms” that “largely define or alter” definitive works. Muñoz created this piece after his seminal 2004 *Re/trato* but before his landmark 2005 *Proyecto para un memorial*. In this piece, we watch the artist's hand continuously attempt to paint a portrait drawn from Colombian obituaries using a wet brush on sunwarmed cement, only to have the sketch evaporate as soon as he finishes. Like Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder endlessly up a hill, the artist tries in vain again and again, superimposing one face upon another in sequences that fleetingly picture the anonymous dead. In the accelerated video, the brush rushes across the surface from hair to cheek

to chin, quickly obscuring one drawn face under another as it evaporates and the hand scurries on.

The final *Proyecto para un memorial* is a five-channel video installation, with each 180 by 135 cm projection devoted to a single face drawn continuously in real time on water upon the hot ground. It is less frenzied, more impactful, perhaps even more dignified for these lost dead—although this project will always remain a project, since the drawings can never be completed. The *Intentos* that preceded it reveal the mechanisms behind this innovative and metaphorically apt choice of materials: water on hot cement fades before we can glimpse the entire portrait, like lives extinguished before their time. In showing the process of superimposition of the faces, one bleeding into the next, these *Intentos* illustrate the artist's initial process of confronting and memorializing the unthinkable number of those souls killed in the violence in Colombia as they fade in and out of appearance and dematerialization.

Muñoz's *Intentos* make visible the customarily invisible experiments that precede finished works, illustrating how he adapts his processes according to the idiosyncrasies of his chosen raw materials—as well as to the laws of chance. Notably, the first person to whom Robert Morris showed his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* was American composer John Cage, whose silent 1952 composition 4'33" famously comprises only the sounds heard in the background while it is being noiselessly performed. Morris recalls that Cage was “transfixed” by the piece: “When Cage came, I turned it on [...] and he wouldn't listen to me. He sat and listened to it for three hours and that was really impressive to me. He just sat there.”⁷

Like Morris's *Box*, Muñoz's *Intentos* reveal process on both conceptual and literal levels. “Subject to change” by the mechanical trials his processes undergo, and “not necessarily defined a priori,”



Oscar Muñoz, *Libro Abierto*, 2019. Three prints on polymer plate stamped on both sides of Arte Bambu & Zonzo 25 gr. paper, 16 3/8 × 13 3/4 in. [closed] 16 3/8 × 27 1/8 in. [opened]

Muñoz's works are also subject to the laws of chance so integral to Cage's philosophies of indeterminacy. As articulated in the realm of music by Cage's student George Brecht: "Music isn't just what you hear or what you listen to, but everything that happens."⁸

This serendipitous "everything that happens" makes its way into Muñoz's practice by his complex processes of trial and error, by his experimentation structured by a set of variables that are at once determinate and governed by chance. For example, in creating *Intentos 1 y 2*: might the heat of the cement in Cali at a specific time of day cause the water portraits to evaporate before they can take recognizable shape? Or, considering *6 Intentos (Biografías)*: how quickly will the water swirl down the drain, leaving only lumps of charcoal dust where once there was a silkscreened visage? Neither condition can be controlled.

Muñoz's processual experimentation in his *Intentos*, allowing for the laws of chance, results as much in technical studies of what such unorthodox substances as charcoal and water are capable of achieving as they are radical artworks in and of themselves. A generous artist, he here shares his experimentation with viewers unaccustomed to such insider views. Their small-scale projections encourage close looking and an intimate experience with artworks whose definitive versions assume more expansive dimensions. Muñoz's *Intentos* effectively constitute conceptual metaphors for his own artistic trajectory: from studying drawing in art school, to independently investigating photographic processes and then applying their diverse creative possibilities on his own, which fostered trial and error and radically expanded uses of photography as a vehicle for other formal, material, and conceptual concerns. Experimenting with the process of this process lies at the heart of the artist's practice. Founded on process, open to chance, and complete with "the sound of their own making," these unassuming, yet seminal, *Intentos* constitute pivotal pieces that change the rules of the game—just as Oscar Muñoz will continue to do on the world stage for years to come.

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Endnotes

1. Oscar Muñoz, "Intentos," 2020. Unpublished manuscript provided by the artist.
2. Transcript, Oral History Interview with Robert Morris and Paul Cummings, March 10, 1968. The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Cf. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-morris-13065>
3. Yve-Alain Bois. *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 222.
4. Oscar Muñoz, Talk, "Global Photography Now," Tate Modern, London, November 2006. published in Carlos Jiménez Moreno et al., *Oscar Muñoz: Documentos de la amnesia* (Bajadoz, Spain: MEIAC, 2009), 206.
5. Cited in Ana Paula Cohen et al., *Crónicas de la Ausencia: Oscar Muñoz y Rosángela Rennó* (Mexico City: Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, México, 2009), 57.
6. Muñoz, "Intentos."
7. Cited in Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 31.
8. George Brecht, in "An Interview with George Brecht by Irmeline Leeber," in *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, (Milan: Multhipla, 1978), 84.



Oscar Muñoz, *Intentos 1 y 2 (Proyecto para un Memorial)*, 2002-2019. Single-channel video 4:3 installation / mini projection, mute, Video: 15 min