

Constellations:
Michael Ned Holte and Patricia Fernández in conversation ⁱ

Michael Ned Holte: *When I walked through your show today, and began to connect the dots—within individual works, with clusters and patterns of collected buttons, but also in the complex relations between these discrete works—the word “constellation” suddenly arrived into my head. (Have we talked about this word before?) Then you showed me your handsome handmade book, and when I opened it up the introductory text made reference to another source for your works at ltd and at the Hammer Museum, titled Atlas of Blue Writings—a really great, provocative title, by the way. Your use of the word “atlas” here seemed to immediately confirm my sense of “constellation.” In Greek mythology, of course, Atlas is condemned to forever hold the heavens aloft. No small task!*

While I don’t expect you to admit you are holding the heavens aloft, I would like to know if you see your role in this body of work as one of mapping constellations—e.g., of personal histories, social histories, and so on?

Patricia Fernández: *A Record of Succession* relates to mapping and making something intangible visible and tactile. Like the idea of a constellation, which becomes visible to the eye depending on location and time, characters and events connect to form patterns. I wanted to record connections that I wasn’t previously aware of through objects and paintings. Perhaps they were chance alignments.

I began with just a few buttons, each one from a different moment in a person’s life, and began to map these out into a painting. Over time, and as I traveled back and forth to Spain, the collection grew with other women, and stories began overlapping, moments were highlighted as a larger narrative emerged. It inevitably became part of my personal narrative. I was tied in a way to these objects that

were given to me, and it became a responsibility to make something of these histories. I thought about an atlas, a way of representing a site, an event in a moment or a person in a place. I wanted to produce an atlas that could be constantly redrawn, or re-written by the subjectivities that created it. The *Atlas of Blue Writings* is a table with an open box that holds a text that takes from the correspondences that took place with the five women. As an atlas, it also contains a key, an index, and other materials as excerpts of a location to bind the book together.

I used my grandfather's carving pattern—what I see as a record of time—as a way to hold the work and represent this chapter. I also made boxes with this carving for each of the women who had given me buttons from their collection. I wanted to chart pieces for a larger narrative. My interest is not only in the points that create the patterns we've named as the constellations, but in the whole area surrounding the stars or points—so, it's this kind unknown space that contains what is told and remembered in a piece of time. In Greek mythology, aren't constellations memories in the sky?

MNH: *Well, the Greeks believed a lot of things! It's a sublime model of memory, and probably as useful as any model we have for such a complex idea and process.*

I was struck by the carved patterning you've adopted from your grandfather when I saw your work at the Hammer: Yes, it's a way of marking time—and what a lot of time you've been marking the past few years! (If I remember, this first appeared in your work in your final show at CalArts.) It has regularity—it's a grid—yet there is a distinctive quality to each mark. What might read as obsessive instead reads as an accumulation of deeply felt gestures. One can read "time" in this work—or, rather, feel it. There is a healthy tension between the visual and tactile in everything you do. Things seem to call out to be handled. Boxes and buttons, of course, are emblematic of this tendency too.

The large cardboard panels you're showing at ltd are essentially full-scale maquettes for the large cabinet at the Hammer, hung like

paintings rather than freestanding furniture, and covered with a grid of discretely drawn Xs. How did you conceive these concurrent shows? Is one the inverse of the other?

PF: The cardboard pieces are drawings for the sculpture. After watching and learning my grandfather's carving two years ago, he began to get involved directly in the work. He sent me cardboard maquettes in the mail for boxes he would make, and folded up drawings for other objects. That's how I began to use the cardboard. It was the clearest way to trace: from him to me and back to him. This was his interpretation of how I would be able to access his carving. The cardboard became part of the process for constructing the large sculpture at the Hammer, and although it reveals the starting point for the work, the cardboard was later cut and re-used in the text I made and inside some of the boxes. Although the cardboard and the wooden sculpture share a similar history, they construct different spaces. Although they might be an inverse of each other they come from the same place; they are materially opposite but conceptually parallel. I wanted for these two different pieces, or these copies, depending how you see it, to end up mirroring each other: one not being able to exist without the other.

MNH: *I like thinking about the cardboard works as mirrors—perhaps because they already insinuate a domestic staging.*

I'd be curious to know what your grandfather makes of that pattern—that timekeeping device—appearing in the context of an American museum. It strikes me that your use of his pattern (which he also adapted from somewhere or someone before him, I'd presume) is a continuation of that pattern, but also a kind of rewriting, a re-inscription—a historical tracing, literally and metaphorically, that nevertheless opens up some new, bigger territory for you to work from.

We've been talking a lot about your grandfather, but I'm also intrigued by these five women whose stories are intertwined in this body of work. Do you see their representation in this work—collectively, perhaps—as a mirror of your grandfather's trace?

PF: Yes, definitely. Some of those buttons were from my grandmother's grandmother. I guess that goes back to the 1800s. The woodworking trade was predominantly male, while the sewing kit and the buttons are what a female traditionally inherited. Both of these materials I see as the starting point for something new. Although they came with limitations they also came with a history, each one being remade or re-thought by the individual. Each button is uniquely from a different person, who collected them across a span of time, from another person, time folding in itself into this tiny object. In a button there was not only a past memory collected, but another expanded. The accumulation of these buttons characterized not only one person, but also the traces of the past into the present. Some kind of non-linear momentum, maybe like an explosion, or also an implosion.

MNH: *I'm wondering: Have you read Dictée, by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha? I don't mean to put you on the spot, but there is something about your constellation of women's narratives and your meditation on accumulated memory that reminds me of this remarkable book, and the specificity of Cha's storytelling. This passage, extracted rather rudely from one rather dazzling section, seems particularly appropriate to our conversation:*

“To keep the pain from translating itself into memory. She begins each time by charting every moment, the date, the time of day, the weather, a brief notation on the events that have occurred or that are to come. She begins each time with this ablution as if this act would release her from the very antiphony to follow. She begins the search the words of equivalence to that of her feeling. Or the absence of it. Synonym, simile, metaphor, byword, byname, ghostword, phantomnation. In documenting the map of her journey.”ⁱⁱ

It goes on like this. Maybe I'm simply trying to make stars align...

PF: Yes, I read *Dictée* about two years ago when I went back to Spain to see family and it lived on my bedside table. I actually picked it up again last year and re-read it, because it had just sat there for a whole year in the same place and it hadn't been moved. I think that's pretty funny, now that you bring it up. I was interested in her artist writings with image and text, and the layers of languages, how she started and stopped the narrative without a clear beginning and end. And of course there are the voices, her body relating to language, how something from history *becomes* when it is spoken. Or how something in memory cannot be spoken because there is no previous text. Assuming a role, she creates an identity that embodies those of the past, spanning time and territory, and voice. I think that was influential to me, the interchangeability of languages, and the thinking processes involved when one speaks in a different language. I spend a lot of time between two places, Spain and Los Angeles, which for me disrupts a linear sense of time. And in this kind of translation, oftentimes there is not a word that can appropriately name.

MNH: *I'm glad to know I wasn't grasping at straws! Yes, your work always seems to circle around language, even when it manifests visibly as painting or objects it is imbued with language or structured by it. I remember when I first met with you in 2009. You were making glyph-like objects that resembled an alphabet—albeit an alphabet I couldn't translate. This seems to be an ongoing impulse. What's changed for you since then?*

PF: I think if we call that an alphabet it would be more like a broken Morse code or something completely closed-in and cryptic. I was translating line drawings rendered on site and years later translating them via a different material. It was an attempt to transform a symbol, or a fragment of a larger representation of a thing, and make a code through this system. It was a lot about destruction and reconstruction. And then putting the thing back into space, in its original location. I started with marks from line drawings that later became clay objects. From the clay objects I would be interested in

only their trace, the absence of the object. The only thing legible outside myself was a set of coordinates to a location that organized these marks. This was the only fixed thing in the work. I think what a viewer could see was the absence of a thing that pointed to some kind of meaning formation, some kind of involved process of building history. But the history was difficult to access and for me that was what drove the work.

I began to write a text composed of letters from my family, written to myself, going back as much as I knew, with what I knew. The letters presented a set of contingencies and retold a history of a group of people whose subjectivities and decisions had shaped my own. This piece was called *A Series of Antecedents*, which later became my thesis exhibition at CalArts in 2010. I used this text as a way for viewers to read the work, allowing for the repetition of image, pattern and object to begin to build a personal language. Although the text is not an explanation of this personal history, it was a way of revealing the layered processes and translation I am invested in today.

§

ⁱ On the occasion of the exhibition “Patricia Fernández: A Record of Succession,” ltd los angeles, June-July 2012.

ⁱⁱ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 140.