

The Organisation and Biology of a Practice



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How does one organise a practice? How does one enact its biology? This text inquires into the structure of Susana Talayero's work and the connections that take place within it, which is not the same as inquiring into the meaning of her practice. My interest here is not the purpose of Susana's practice or what it appears to represent, but how it works, and how it generates a particular set of relationships. I invoke the warning against looking to a book (in our case, to an artistic practice) for its meaning: "we will never ask what a book means [...] We will ask what it functions with"¹. I have chosen three figures through which to explore the mechanics of Susana's work: the flower, the table, and the face. These three elements are "figures" in the sense in which feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway uses the term, not as representations or illustrations but as material-semiotic nodes, "where the biological and the literary or artistic come together with all the force of lived reality"². In other words, the figure as a place where connections occur and combine.

This text borrows its title from a small book on zoology that I found in Susana's studio, and as such it follows the same path as the exhibition that it accompanies: from the studio to the museum. This gesture is not intended to legitimise or complete her work, but to release its potential, as in alchemical operation. Biology and alchemy are kindred "sciences" involving high doses of speculation and empiricism, the only difference is the degree of faith required. The biology that I want to carry out here is not pure science: the point is not to establish a series of objective truths, but to inquire into the capacities of Susana's work, into what, as an organism, it can do.

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Continuum : London and New York, 2004, p. 4. (original ed., *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* ; vol. 2. *Mille plateaux*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1980). This essay draws on one main source: Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of desire. This is no simple whim. Their notion of the aesthetic experience as becoming has been an important influence in Susana's work since 2008, the year she and I met. My own encounter with *A Thousand Plateaus* dates from the same time. See particularly chapters 1 ("Introduction: Rhizome"), 5 ("On Several Regimes of Signs"), and 7 (Year Zero: Faciality").

2 Donna J. Haraway, "Introduction" in *When species meet*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 4.



What It Does to Us, installation view,
Galería Carreras Múgica, Bilbao, 2009

Garden, Not Forest

Susana engages with the flower, not the tree. Her practice inhabits the garden, not the forest. Deleuze and Guattari (hereinafter D&G) propose the figure of the rhizome in opposition to the image of the tree, arguing that the tree and what they call the “root-foundation” have dominated Western thought and cultural practice: “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much.”³ The root-foundation, which is key to classical thought, has three main characteristics: dichotomy, hierarchy, and false multiplicity. Under it, everything is classified in divisions and subdivisions that split into two: each body, each idea, and each image is simply the product of the forking of a stem or a branch that remains anchored to its roots. The image of a tree is based on a centred, hierarchical organisational model: it implies a centre of meaning (the trunk) that directs transmission to a secondary series of roots and branches. And lastly, there is no place for multiplicity in arborescent thought, which is the domain of trees and of growth through identity. A forest does not proceed by means of multiplicity but through the reproduction of a single, central unit, from which small roots sometimes sprout, giving an illusion of false multiplicity



Domestic Flights, 2010, video screenshot

(the image of the cutting). The rhizome, on the other hand, operates according to principles of connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity. Unlike trees and roots, which grow from a fixed position, the rhizome can and must connect any point to any other point. The traits of a rhizome are not necessarily connected to other traits of the same nature, as a rhizome never seeks the identical. But the multiplicity of the rhizome is not simply a sum of discrete units, or a unit to which another is added. The rhizome is neither the forest nor the cutting. The many rhizomatic images that D&G touch on include bulbs, tubers, pack animals, and weeds. “The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couch-grass.”⁴ D&G describe Western thought in terms of the dominance of the tree, but also of the fields and pastureland won over from the forest for agriculture. Meanwhile, Eastern thought developed in relation to the steppe and to horticulture. The body that sows and reaps as opposed to the body that digs and unearths. In the garden, halfway between forest and horticulture, is where Susana’s flowers grow.

³ Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 17.

⁴ Ibid. p. 7.



Plant Drawings series, installation view,
studio in Vicolo Santa Margherita, Rome, 1987

In Susana's interspecies garden we find: children and palm trees, organ-plants, face-flowers, floral fertili-sations, links, fleas, flying thoughts, flowers on the run, *donnas fugatas*, flower-eyes, Marilyn and Buñuel plants, black flowers, powers, four European species and many others without a home or a homeland. Susana's flowers spring from tubercular, lateral, pivoting, rhizomatic, non-arboreal roots. Her most emblematic rhizome-flower is probably the *Tillandsia* or "airplant" featured in one of the short scenes in her video *Domestic Flights* (2010), shooting out in many directions, a body with propagative limbs framed in the architecture of a domestic courtyard. Propagative or adventitious plants break away from the mother plant and grow independently. There are no single progenitors or origins in the world of the rhizome. There is "no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language that stabilises around a certain element"⁵. Similarly, Susana's work has no principal medium or language—painting, some could say—around which minor languages like drawing and video revolve and strive to be heard. Instead, a multiplicity of languages and adventitious roots feed into a single bulbous practice. "Painting and drawing are the same thing," she says.

Susana's garden is not Eden—it is neither origin nor mythology. Susana's garden is not the *Garden of Delights*, it is not allegory. Nor is it the aesthetic whim of the 17th century aristocracy, with symmetrical architecture and geometric vegetation. It is not Versailles. The spread of Susana's garden over walls and floors does not mimic the design of a city park, with horizontal flowerbeds and vertical woodlands. In Susana's garden, I repeat, there are no trees.⁶ The horizontal plane of Susana's garden—its expansion at floor level—evokes a subterranean world of bulbs, earthworms, buried babies, dancing tarantulas, and *petaludas*

5 Ibid. p. 8.

6 The big exception is *Rutas insólitas*, an educational project organised by Susana in collaboration with forestry engineer Claudia Maldonado for the Department of Education and Cultural Action at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. The project set up connections between works from the museum's collection and several trees from the surrounding park. In this case, engagement with the trees was for a greater purpose: to destabilise the "rooted" logic that traditionally characterises the relationship between a museum and its collection.

pierced by pins⁷. Susana's garden is dark (interestingly, as well as "garden", the Spanish word "jardín" means "a toilet in a boat", and "the fissures that spoil the clarity of an emerald"). Susana's dark, infectious garden reminds me of the garden that filmmaker Derek Jarman created in the coastal town of Dungeness in England, near an operational nuclear power plant, during the last years of his life, as he gradually lost his sight due to complications of AIDS. With no apparent order or structure, the garden consists of stones, weeds, wild species that don't require care, and pale poppies. "But colorless. Colorless, wrote Sylvia Plath of some blood-red poppy blossoms"⁸. Flowers first appeared in Susana's work while she lived in Rome (in the 1987 series *Disegni vegetali (Plant Drawings)*), but they exploded later, in a 2000 exhibition of pictures produced during an artist's residency at Yaddo (Saratoga Springs, New York), where Sylvia Plath had lived in the late fifties. Although the exhibition was originally held without a title, Susana later called it *No quería flores (I Didn't Want Any Flowers)*, a title that echoes Plath's poem "Tulips", included in the collection *Ariel* (1961). Plath was the main influence for the floral motif in this series, along with Paul Celan and his book of poems *Mohn und Gedächtnis (Poppy and Memory, 1952)*.

But Susana's flowers are not just a simple motif, they are a "place from which to imagine". Ramón Mayrata writes: "The emanation of a flower—of an initial form that evokes a flower—can be recognised in her paintings, but our eyes would be deceived if they focused on its boundaries. They are impetus more than boundaries."⁹ Susana's flowers are not a problem of representation, given that the world of the rhizome admits no divisions between the field of reality, the field of representation, and the field of subjectivity.¹⁰ Susana's garden is not an image; it is an assemblage of each of those orders of things.

On All Fours

As an organisational strategy, Susana's "garden" sometimes takes on other forms. The work we've entitled *Mesa-Roma (Rome-Table, 2016)* in this exhibition is a kind of garden, a material accumulation of interconnections between plant and animal images, faces, blotches, and found objects. As in previous assemblages (see images on pages 35 and 36), Susana explores the spatial and political potential of the horizontal plane "like a table that can be reset at whim in endless configurations."¹¹ Susana's use of the horizontal plane can be traced to her atlas-impulse and to the relationship between work and the floor in her practice. When I think of Susana's studio, the image that most often comes to mind is the floor. The first time I saw her works they were laid out on the ground, and in my many memories of her working in her studio she is down on all fours, like one of the she-wolves that appear in her paintings. Another image that comes to mind is the cover of the publication *Resilire* (2009)—a photograph of a drawing-stain on the floor of the studio, so that the floor becomes a portable surface in the reader's hands. In Susana's work, the ground—and even the space beneath it, if we think of her early below-ground studios in Rome—is the "wall" on which relationships play out. The floor is not a root or an anchor in Susana's work, it is a plane that enables connections to form in ever-changing directions. Susana's artistic practice is horizontal, but not in the sense in which the history

7 "Petaluda", which means butterfly in Greek, is the title of a painting by Susana that forms part of the *Garden*. The term is also a reference to a brief unpublished text on Susana's work by the writer Ángel Amezketa ("Petaluda", 2002). The semantic similarity between the term "petaluda", "petal" and "peluda" (Spanish for "hairy") reinforce the organic imaginary that prevails in Susana's work.

8 Ramón Mayrata. "La flor es un lugar" in *Susana Talayero*. [Exhib. cat.] Bilbao : Galería Colón XVI, 2001.

9 Ibid.

10 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 25.

11 Susana's comments on French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman's interpretation of the *Atlas Mnemosyne* (1924-1929), the ambitious project in which German art historian Aby Warburg set out to produce a history of Mediterranean civilisations through a vast collection of images arranged according to elective affinities. Information sheet for the exhibition *Reponer la mesa (procesos gráficos) (Re-Setting the Table (graphic processes))*, La Taller, Bilbao, 2012-2013. Online at: <http://susanatalayero.bera.me/proyectos/reponer-la-mesa-procesos-graficos-2012/>.



Re-Setting the Table (graphic processes), installation view, La Taller, Bilbao, 2012-2013

of representation has fixed the female body on the horizontal plane. Rather, her horizontality is an attempt—conscious or not—at reworking the verticality imposed by culture. While Freud¹² suggested that the origins of culture go back to the estrangement of the body from the ground and the adoption of an upright stance, with the subsequent devaluation of the sense of smell in favour of vision, Susana’s practice consists equally of “that which is seen, heard, touched and smelt, that which is upright, bent and recumbent.”¹³

Mesa-Roma is both homogenous and proliferating. Structurally, it looks like a conventional low table that unfolds into a series of clusters and overlapping sections. One end of the installation, which holds works from the late-eighties to 1994, includes: small sculptures made out of scraps of sheets of rubber left over from manufacturing tyres and boot soles (another link to the ground), in shapes that suggest birds, insects, and

12 Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Original edition *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930 [1929]) ed. Todd Dufrense, trans. Gregory C. Richter. Ontario : Broadview Press, 2016, p. 75 13-116.

13 Paco Juan Costa, “La claridad que circunscribe lo velado = Ezkutua mugatzen duen argitasuna” in *Susana Talayero : [Mal d’Africa]*. [Exhib. cat.]. Basauri : Kultur Basauri, 1995. After finishing this text, I read a 2013 interview in which Susana confirms these ideas: “I always work horizontally, on the floor. It is a highly gestural posture in which the movements of my body determine the things that happen. I feel braver when I work crouching or standing over large pieces of paper or boards spread out on the floor. I am interested in experiencing the body’s entanglement with the floor, and particularly the performative nature of the act of drawing itself. [...] Horizontal surfaces allow me to walk over the work.” Elena Solatxi Arizabalaga. “Análisis del concepto de creatividad y tipologías procesuales en treinta artistas vascas contemporáneas” [doctoral thesis]. Faculty of Fine Arts, UPV-EHU, 2014, pp. 579-580. Online at: <https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/14748>.



Provisional and Shifting Principles, installation view, Arteleku, San Sebastián, 2014

other “lower forms of life”,¹⁴ shown alongside black-and-white photographs of the same pieces displayed on walls on previous occasions; microfiches—small pieces of blue acetate with information printed on them—found on the street, on which Susana created images of microorganisms and invertebrate creatures using subtractive techniques such as scratching and dissolving the colour; and a small image on an x-ray plate entitled *L’osservatore romano (per non indurre in tentazione) [to not fall into temptation]* (1995), produced for a group show in support of the fight against AIDS, whose title is an ironic reference to *L’Osservatore Romano*, the newspaper of the Holy See. *Mesa-Roma* is the habitat of the extensive zoography that populates Susana’s practice.¹⁵

Mesa-Roma is also a space that condenses a decade of experiences in Rome. But Rome in Susana’s work is not just the memory of a former home, or the site for an archaeology of nostalgia. Instead, the city is an organisational model through which to generate relationships and structure time. Just as Amsterdam, “with

14 Milton Gendel, “Fantasías sobre Aviaros e Insectarios = Aviary and Insectarium fantasies” in *Susana Talayero, 1996-97* [Exhib. brochure]. Bilbao : Galería Vanguardia, 1997.

15 Susana’s zoography is made up of numerous species, including: deer, stray dogs, ugly ducklings, blind insects, birds, many birds, bacillus, bats, butterflies, and gorillas. The links between her work and the animal question are so rich that they would require a text of their own. But it is worth mentioning again that Susana’s relationship with animality is not a problem of representation; here there is no separation between the world, its image, and our experience of it. In Susana’s work, the animal world—like the flower and the garden—is the connection between each of those three orders.

its stem-canals, where utility connects with the greatest folly,¹⁶ is a rhizome-city, so Rome is for Susana. I am not familiar with Rome, I have not yet been there. But I sense some of its principles in Susana's work: Rome is the articulation of the "pastpresent", a term that Katie King¹⁷ uses to describe a certain way of thinking about layered history that exceeds chronological time and emphasises the awareness of how histories are interwoven. When Susana says that her relationship with Rome is one of "constant coming and going", she does not just mean that she still regularly travels to the city for projects and collaborations, but also that there is no linear order running from past to present in her work. Rome is also an expression of accumulation and of the relationship between the old and the new. As Spanish pop group Hidrogenesse say in the note accompanying their tribute album *Rome* (2015), the city is "an accumulation of things without a hierarchy, or a succession of things with no foreseeable order."¹⁸

Faces that Flee

In Susana's work, the face is dismantled and floats free of meanings. According to D&G's theory of regimes of signs, the face is central to signification, a space where meaning is fixed and regulated ("faciality"), based on a stable alignment that is difficult to disrupt. It functions like an abstract machine for the collection and distribution of meanings. The history of representation—particularly painting—is organised around faciality: until the Renaissance, the face was the central icon of the signifying regime. The face is political; it is the art of upholding meanings. But if the face is a politics, "dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine."¹⁹ Susana's practice is committed to the politics of dismantling faces. This is probably what Paco Juan Costa had in mind when he described Susana's work as "activist" in a text accompanying an exhibition of her *Retratos (Portraits)* series at the Casa de Cultura in Basauri (Bizkaia)²⁰. Costa pointed out Susana's "constant wariness of anything that springs from negotiation", the adoption of premises that revolve around the periphery (what he calls the "field of eccentricity") and the "desire for shape" (for giving or removing shape) as some of the distinctive characteristics of the series. Once the face blurs and the features of "faciality" disappear, we enter a different regime of signification, "other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible where subterranean becomings-animal occur, becomings-molecular, nocturnal deterritorializations over-spilling the limits of the signifying system."²¹ These are the zones through which Susana's clandestine faces move.

In Susana's work, the stable organization of the face dissolves into indistinct patches of colour (*Autoritratto (Self-Portrait)*, 1987), profiles with broken outlines (*Dibujos rotos (Broken Drawings)*, 1991), features distorted in multiple directions (*Retratos bulbosos (Bulbous Portraits)*, 2013), faces in the process of breaking down (*Cabezonas (Big Heads)*, 2014). Susana's faces are not identity but maps in the Deleuzian sense: surfaces that remain open, that can be adapted, changed, with multiple lines of flight. Like the body of the *Donna fugata (Fleeing Woman)*, 2007) vanishing into the garden. In the series *Retratos* (1991-1994), the bodiless faces corroborate the relationship between landscape and face: "All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape; all landscapes are populated by a loved or dreamed-of face, develop a face to come or already past."²² The close-up—first in painting, and then in film—constructs the face as landscape. In the series

16 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 17.

17 Katie King. "Historiography as reenactment: metaphors and literalizations of TV documentaries" in *Criticism*, Detroit, vol. 46, no. 3, summer 2004, pp. 459-475.

18 <http://www.austrohungaro.com/hidrogenesse/roma/?roma=historia>

19 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 208.

20 Costa 1995.

21 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 128.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 191.



Advertisement Drawings (2008), installation view, Museo de Pollença, Majorca, 2009

Retratos, the outlines of faces on yellowish, map-like paper suggest the horizons and mountain ranges of a land that is unknown but ready to be explored. In the exhibition at the Casa de Cultura in Basauri, this correlation between face and territory was emphasised by the title of the exhibition, *Mal d’Africa* (*Africa fever*), borrowed from a song by Franco Battiato²³. In the series *Profili* (*Profiles*, 1995), foam board faces in shapes that recall the outlines of countries appear to vanish when they are displayed in profile. “The averted faces, in profile, replace the frontal view of the radiant face.”²⁴ Meanwhile, in the *Retratos bulbosos*, the face comes apart, becoming-vegetable: the face is a bulb, a below-ground organ. But this is not anthropomorphism, it is not the attribution of human characteristics to another species. It would be naive to interpret the painting *Ciervo* (*Deer*, 1988)—a frontal “portrait” of a deer—as anthropomorphism, given that there is nothing inherently human about faces: “It would be an error to proceed as though the face became inhuman only beyond a certain threshold: close-up, extreme magnification, recondite expression, etc. The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start.”²⁵ Susana’s work is not about anthropomorphism, but about becoming and producing other faces. Meanwhile, in the series *Dibujos anuncio* (*Advertisement Drawings*, 2008), the face is malaise. These are scowling faces. Chicano feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa talks about “making face” in terms of expressing emotions, usually adverse emotions such as sadness, pain, or anger, by distorting facial features. Anzaldúa argues that to “make a face”, to look sad or angry, is

23 The expression “mal d’Africa”—of colonial origins—refers to the “nostalgia” that a Westerner feels after visiting the African continent. Battiato’s song is about the difference between alienated life in the city and the magical realism of his native Sicily. Although according to the exhibition catalogue its official title was *Susana Talayero*, the words *Mal d’Africa*, were written on the wall of the room where the exhibition was held. Susana considers it the real title of the exhibition, and it has been generally considered as such since then.

24 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, 136.

25 *Ibid.*, p.189.



Kronica (1992), set up as part of the *Rome-Table* in the Bilbao studio, 2016

a subversive gesture, a political act of displaying discontent to the world and questioning the status quo of the engraved body (the body marked as woman, as coloured, as working class). “The world knows us by our faces, the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body. When our *caras* do not live up to the “image” that the family or community wants us to wear and when we rebel against the engraving of our bodies, we experience ostracism, alienation, isolation, and shame.”²⁶ The faces in *Dibujos anuncio rebel*, “making faces” against the imposed repression of identity. “Je suis une fille un po bizarra”, proclaims one of the drawings. And the *Cabezonas* also resist identity: larger than life, distorted, blown-out, nothing but head, hybrid, fusion, painting. Heads that are “more dangerous than a box-full of bombs.”²⁷ They are the very face of impropriety.

Coda: *Kronica*

Kronica (1992) is a small painting by Susana showing an insect with two appendices and a pair of long antennae, a kind of ant, against a white background, beside the word “kronica”. According to the dictionary,

²⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa (ed.). *Making face, making soul – Haciendo caras : Creative and critical perspectives by women of color*. San Francisco : Aunt Lute Books, 1990, p. XV.

²⁷ Text written in 2014 by Grace Livingstone [Mari Pepa] in response to Susana Talayero’s *Cabezonas* series (unpublished).

a *crónica* (chronicle) is a record of events in the order in which they occurred. As an adjective, *crónico* or *crónica* (chronic) can be used to describe a long-term illness, ailment, or bad habit. Something can also be chronic if it goes back a long time. Susana's *Kronica* is somewhere between these last two meanings: an indicator of an excessive practice that takes place in pastpresent time. Susana's works rarely refer to time, except for a small watercolour on paper entitled *Calendario* (*Calendar*, 1987), and above all, *Kronica*. The titles of her works over the past twenty years generally include two types of terms: 1) words that refer to movement and travel ("detours", "routes", "flights", "shifting principles", "reset"); 2) words associated with the world of the fragment ("micro", "scenes", "trifles", "captures"). Nonetheless, time is the core structuring principle of this exhibition, which is essentially an attempt to propose a possible organisation of a non-linear practice spanning three decades. The decision to include *Kronica* was made at the last moment, but it could easily be the symbol of the entire exhibition. *Kronica* is also the ant that exemplifies the principles of the rhizome: "You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and time again after most of it has been destroyed. Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialised, organised, signified, attributed, etc.; as well as lines of deterritorialisation down which it constantly flees."²⁸ Susana's practice is a ceaselessly self-reorganising ant colony.

The biology of Susana's work that I have tried to practice here is "bad science", as it is neither based on objective knowledge nor on verifiable hypotheses. My observations are partial, and my methods questionable. The only sure science here is that of the vertigo at the prospect of organising a living, restless practice. As a living body, Susana's work allows organisation, but it resists classification because it does not stem from classes or families: it arises out of temporary relationships and encounters. The works did not spill over the walls of the studio into the museum and proceed to adapt to its necro-taxonomies—"contemporary art", "major and minor work", "women's art". Rather, as in the interaction of two organisms, Susana's artistic practice seeks to institute the museum as an ecosystem propitious to life.

28 Deleuze/Guattari 2004, p. 10.