

Home Address: Elena del Rivero's Domestic Politics and Heretical Modernism

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For me, the handkerchiefs hanging on the wall occupy the space between “torch” and “torchon.”¹

--Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 1934

All language, all writing, every poetico-performative or theoretico-informative text dispatches, sends itself, allows itself to be sent.²

--Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” 1984

Elena del Rivero (b. Valencia, 1949) is a Spanish-American artist whose output spans writing, handwork, and post-minimalist serial production.³ This essay identifies some of the tactics and techniques she uses in order to analyze her nearly two-decade-long series “Letter from Home” (2001-). The artworks in “Letter from Home” appear, at first glance, to be massive, even monstrous dishtowels, but are in fact canvases, sheets of paper (many scaled very large), or printed flags (**FIG 1**).⁴ Del Rivero inaugurated the series with *[Swi:t] Home*, five large-scale paper dishtowels brought to term in a year-long process between 2000 to 2001 for the exhibition *Performance Drawings* (The Drawing Center, New York). One of the most recent additions is *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* (2019/2020), the edition of 19 flag-artworks del Rivero has created to commemorate the

¹ Benjamin, *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland, Michael Jennings, et. al. (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 85.

² Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” *Diacritics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984): 29.

³ For an instance of Elena del Rivero explicitly discussing the importance of feminism (while noting younger artists are worried about embracing the term), see Ángeles García, “Elena del Rivero reclama cuotas en el arte contemporáneo,” *El País* (September 17, 2016), https://elpais.com/cultura/2016/09/12/actualidad/1473682219_046776.html.

⁴ Some of the earliest works that led to “Letters from Home” were realized large-scale on paper.

anniversary of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, the legislation that granted the right to vote to American women (despite the *de jure* change, other systems of discrimination prevented many women of color from exercising their rights). My final sections contextualize del Rivero's current project within her broader oeuvre in order to provide an explanation of the stakes of her contemporary brand of suffrage banners. Del Rivero's work is richly shot through with interpretive threads, a quality that entreats spectators to tease out numerous connections. Hence, my assessment is not intended to be definitive and represents but one voice in a chorus of reflections about *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* generated by contributors at institutions that host the multiple.

The works of "Letter from Home" shine a light on domestic politics—in various senses of the phrase. They play with traditional ideas of the "feminine" in order to explode such categories. By shifting gridded, feminine-coded forms from the kitchen to the public sphere del Rivero blurs distinctions between traditionally feminine and masculine realms. She prompts a consideration of "women's work", especially the labor of care—maintaining, mending, cleaning, preparing—that occurs in the home and tends to be largely invisible. Moreover, the artist plumbs the intersections of "lowly" textiles and fine art, especially the medium of painting. The works in the series reveal the grid, an "ur-modernist form," to be common to both high modernism and the kitchen; hence, they stake feminist claims on history of art and highlight overlooked aesthetic aspects of material culture.⁵ Del Rivero addresses many of her "letters" to major male modernists, including one dedicated to Walter Benjamin. The exchanges flow laterally: Benjamin's drug-inspired words

⁵ See Rosalind Kraus's classic "Grids" *October* 9 (summer, 1979): 50-64.

about domestic textiles illuminate del Rivero's fabrications: they in turn exist between quotidian cloths and more incendiary, evocative material.

Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* provides rich interpretive lenses that I extend to read "Letter from Home": according to the Berkeley art historian, textiles "fray" boundaries "between artistic genres," can be "infringement[s] into nonart," and are "tactile forms of communication or kinds of writing."⁶ Because of these qualities, Del Rivero's artworks contribute a new perspectives on history and a new strand of critical discourse. Following the punning lead of the feminist art magazine *Heresies* (1977-93), this essay argues that creating "heretical" strands of modernism is one del Rivero's key strategies. She interrogates patriarchal orthodoxies of art and culture in a collaborative fashion: by translation and dialogue. I parse out "Letter from Home's" evocations and invocations and argue that, despite often being nourished by other authorities, her works are ultimately generous and generative: they enable the imagining of "blasphemous" iterations of the past, shedding new light on her references, and revealing their relevance for the present.

In the "Para-": Del Rivero's Heretical Tactics

Outside Elena del Rivero's home-studio in Manhattan's East Village there is a small plaque that reads "The Paraclete." It has graced her threshold since she began residing in the apartment following the devastation of her prior residence in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent separation from her partner.⁷ Considering it an apotropaic baptism, she extended the

⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

⁷ Del Rivero, email to the author, August 11, 2020.

appellation to her website, the virtual home of her artwork. This uncommon, if not vaguely archaic term derives from Greek (παρά-[para-] + κλητός called out, invited); it literally means “called to one’s side” and is most commonly used in Christian scriptures to refer to the Holy Spirit as “an advocate, intercessor; a helper or comforter.”⁸ Del Rivero asserts ownership of the word, understanding it to mean “goddess.”⁹ She gives the word heterodox, feminine inflections. Especially relevant for my present discussion is its prefix “para-,” which implies a process of going beyond, existing beside, or producing an improper version of something.¹⁰ The artist hopes spectators will think with her forms to hunt for poetic connections or resonances between her work and other texts outside galleries, such as Benjamin’s *On Hashish*.

Del Rivero’s unruly oeuvre cannot be contained in a single medium; instead, it would be best to consider her work as occupying the frayed areas of para-photography, para-drawing, and para-painting. She collides craft, textile arts, writing, literature, and performance, playing with recognizable conventions proper to distinct artistic media and genres. The latter word in Spanish (*género*) also means “gender,” the norms of which she regularly bends. Her methods to push against established, patriarchal logics run corollary to the feminist literary theories and layered language play of Hélène Cixous, who argues in “The Laugh of the Medusa” that “woman un-thinks [*dé-pense*: a double-entendre also suggesting “spends” and “administers”], the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces.”¹¹ In *The Book of Promethea*, Cixous’s

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (online edition), s.v. “Paraclete,” accessed November 12, 2017,

⁹ Del Rivero in conversation with the author March 19, 2017,

<http://www.oed.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/view/Entry/137308?redirectedFrom=paraclete#eid>.

¹⁰ Particularly relevant for this discussion is J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring, 1977): 439-447.

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen *Signs* (Summer 1976): 882. “Un-thinks” is moreover a punning double entendre

narrator poses a line of inquiry that del Rivero answers with her artworks: “the question driving me mad is: how can one manage to be simultaneously inside and outside?”¹²

“Impure” facture—at the same time within and beyond—characterizes “Letter from Home,” but can be traced back through her earlier projects. For example, *Letter to the Mother* (1993) combines oil painting with type writing (arguably a form of printmaking) on letter paper; *Letter to the Mother #088* (1996) is a composition made of horizontal lines of string recalling lines of prose, with pencil and ink stamped additions; *Unfinished Letter to a Young Daughter* (1998-99) (fig. 2) consists of one hundred and thirty pages of paper inscribed with colored ink, pencil, and felt-tip, painted with gouache, and sewn with metallic thread.¹³

An unmistakable epistolary emphasis courses through del Rivero’s oeuvre. José María Parreño is one of the first commentators to assess the artist’s interest in writing; anticipating some of Bryan-Wilson’s arguments, he emphasizes parallels between text and textiles.¹⁴ Parreño sees del Rivero’s sewing of letters as “carrying out an etymological operation, as text comes from texture and textile, hence textual.”¹⁵ He continues, noting the profound connection “goes beyond the verbal and contaminates the whole semantic field. Thread, stretcher, loom, needle and awl. ... have their correspondence in writing: discourse, page, study, pencil or quill.”¹⁶ He further argues that del Rivero’s works with letters link archetypal feminine activities, sewing and “seek[ing]

¹² Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*, trans. Betsy Wing (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 16.

¹³ *Unfinished Letter* contains 600 sheets.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Finch also importantly focuses on letter writing in her essay “Elena del Rivero’s Correspondences,” *At Hand: Works on Paper by Elena del Rivero* (Valencia and Valladolid: IVAM and Patio Herreriano, 2006).

¹⁵ José María Parreño, *Elena del Rivero* (Madrid: La Conservera, 2010), 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

correspondence with an invisible audience sometimes figured as an absent mother, lover, or friend.”¹⁷

Rather than be solely the result of more postmodern influences, her interest in letters (and the Paraclete) also stems from reading Maria Zambrano’s “Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer.”¹⁸ The twentieth-century Spanish philosopher, poet, and essayist focusses on remarkable agency of Héloïse in the medieval romance of Héloïse and Abelard, respectively a nun and abbot (twice condemned for heresy) who maintain an illicit affair and romantic as well as theological-philosophical correspondence.¹⁹ The lovers were both buried in a Benedictine monastery, The Oratory of the Paraclete, where Abelard was abbot and later Héloïse abbess.²⁰ Their remains were likely transferred to the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in the early 19th Century, a location Del Rivero has made several pilgrimages to.²¹ Zambrano underscores that, contrasting with most tales of courtly love, Héloïse avoids the entrapment of being turned into an idealized “sacred image.”²² Certainly, within the history of art, there is a risk of a similar kind of objectification as image. And, when women are depicted as primary subjects, it is not uncommon to find them imagined in the guise of the letter writer (or reader). Artists ranging from Johannes Vermeer, to Mary Cassatt, to Pablo Picasso, to Cindy Sherman have taken up this trope femininity. Pursuing the course that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Del Rivero, email to the author, August 11, 2020. See Zambrano, “Eloísa o la existencia de la mujer,” *Sur* 124 (February 1945): 35-58.

¹⁹ Del Rivero admires Abelard for his intellect, describing him as “the Foucault of the 12th century France” and noting that his teachings at Notre Dame helped form the kernel of what would become La Sorbonne. Del Rivero, email to the author, August 18, 2020.

²⁰ See Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, “Elena del Rivero’s Healing Feminism,” 2020, *ELENA DEL RIVERO: 'HASH BROWNIES' AFTER ALICE B. TOKLAS*, Henrique Faria | New York, www.henriquefaria.com/exhibition-about?id=149 (accessed August 15, 2020).

²¹ There is some debate about their final resting place. See James Burge, *Héloïse & Abelard: A New Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 276–277.

²² Zambrano, 45 (my translation).

Zambrano's Héloïse blazed, Del Rivero forgoes representational portraiture and instead works with feminine-coded processes themselves.

The "Letter" in every title locates del Rivero's projects within a field of textual interchange, yet her dispatches contain a dearth of writing. Indeed, in the earlier *Letter to the Mother* the medium, an amorphous, black greasy stain of oil paint, screams out and effaces the standardized, printed language. In *Unfinished Letter to a Young Daughter*, rows of intersecting diagonals in red felt-tip pen fill the folios.²³ These "X" marks are a series of crossings out—mistakes committed, denials of language, things not uttered—but equally suggest cross stitching and embroidery (*punto de cruz*). Thus, in these "letters" writing, drawing, and sewing become one activity. Typically deftness with a pen or pencil is referred to as draftsmanship (or penmanship for handwriting); she always insists she is a "draftswoman," a political claim that foregrounds gender and resonates with her creative methods.²⁴

Beyond the recuperation of "feminine" techniques and themes, an inclusive and collective feminist spirit—as opposed to a more typically masculine individuality—also characterizes many of the exhibitions of del Rivero's work where she frays the lines between distinct authorities in the art system, donning the hats of artist *and* curator. Resonating with Cixous, her tactics provoke an "alteration in power relations and in the production of individualities."²⁵ For her 2016 exhibition, *My Friends and Other Animals*, at Madrid's Travesía Cuatro del Rivero included work by her circle of acquaintances (Janice Guy, Freya Powell, Esther Ferrer, Tere Recarens, Ángeles Marco, Lily van der Stokker, Kiki Bauer, who designed the flyer, and John Coplans) as well as two

²³ Both of these projects are also relate to gendered family dynamics and more traumatic aspects of del Rivero's own biography, specifically her fraught relationships—which she eventually resolved—with her mother and her daughter.

²⁴ Del Rivero uses this term in a number of biographic texts.

²⁵ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 882-883.

dishtowels from “Letter from Home,” one work on canvas and another in the form of a flag flying outside.²⁶ Del Rivero’s proud artwork-banner signified female protagonism as well as a claiming of the gallery in an effort to rectify gender imbalances in art. In fact, the work of the sole male artist (Coplans) was hung in a marginal location above a conference table. Her exhibition’s title, plays on British naturalist Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals* (1956). She suggests that genealogies are not solely biological and instead emphasizes the social aspects of art-making by presenting a friendship network with creations by its members.²⁷

Hash Brownies for Alice B Toklas (fig. 3) (Henrique Faria Fine Art, February 13 – July 31, 2020) is another layered exhibition title alluding to shared authorship that featured “Letters from Home”. On one hand, the title refers to the contribution to *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1956) by artist and poet Brion Gysin, who regularly corresponded with Toklas by post in the 1950s.²⁸ The title more specifically connects to the translation of Gysin’s “fudge” recipe into cannabis brownies that serve as the central gag in the comedy *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas* (1968), which stars Peter Sellers.²⁹ Gysin gets eclipsed by Toklas, who in turn is rarely spoken of without being linked to Gertrude Stein—a fact mentioned with tongue-in-cheek in the film.³⁰ Transcending mere historical allusion, del Rivero also engineered a real decentralizations of her own artistic authority. In an act of para-curation, she generously opened up her solo-show. In order to raise the visibility

²⁶ See Ángeles García, “Elena del Rivero reclama cuotas en el arte contemporáneo.” *El País*. September 17, 2016, https://elpais.com/cultura/2016/09/12/actualidad/1473682219_046776.html.

²⁷ See Del Rivero, *My Friends and Other Animals* (Madrid: Travesía Cuatro, 2016), http://travesiacuatro.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Texto_english.pdf.

Networking is arguably also required along with production to achieve success in the field of art.

²⁸ See “Alice B. Toklas correspondence, 1933-1961, 1977-001,” The University of Tulsa, McFarlin Library, *Department of Special Collections & University Archives*, <https://utulsa.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/2/resources/125> (accessed July 28, 2020).

²⁹ See John Geiger, *Nothing Is True-Everything Is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin* (New York: Disinformation, 2005), unpaginated ebook [section 9].

³⁰ See *ibid.*

of other women in the art world, she invited artists Amanda Hunter and Alaina Claire Feldman to participate with her.³¹

In addition, del Rivero engages in practices we might best term “para-citation” or “para-translation”: her works often incorporate poetic or antagonistic (and deliberate) misquotations or unfaithful, collaborative translations. Indeed, being unfaithful, implies not adhering to the authority of the original creator—a gesture that is clearly heretical. Del Rivero’s “heresies” tend to alter naturalized elements of originals, often for the purpose of questioning gender roles, affirming the parity of women and men (and sometimes the primacy of the “fairer sex”), or blurring binaristic bounds completely. For example, *Letter to the Mother* is a riff on Kafka’s *Letter to His Father* (1919), a 45-page excoriation of his narcissistic father, which, despite the writer giving the missive to his mother to pass along, was not ever delivered.³²

Del Rivero’s citations exceed texts and operate in the visual realm as well. Thomas Girst discusses the ways del Rivero dialogued with her artistic forebears. He focuses on the influence of another nomadic and expatriate artist, Marcel Duchamp, in a close reading of the performative photograph *Les Amoureuses: Elena & Rrose* (2001).³³ *Les Amoureuses* takes up Julian Wasser’s iconic image of Marcel Duchamp engaged in a chess match against a nude Eve Babitz at the august Dadaist’s important 1963 Pasadena Museum of Art retrospective.³⁴ Del Rivero fragments Wasser’s photograph even as she amplifies it: she turns it into a life-sized backdrop, produced from many

³¹ See Del Rivero, *My Friends and Other Animals*.

³² Del Rivero in conversation with the author, August 27, 2017.

³³ Thomas Girst, “Elena del Rivero and Marcel Duchamp: *Les Amoureuses*,” *Tout-fait 2* (2002-03), <http://toutfait.com/elena-del-rivero-and-marcel-duchamp-les-amoureuses/>.

³⁴ Wasser gave del Rivero permission to use his photograph in her work. For a longer analysis of this project see *Ibid*.

sheets of paper (fig. 4). Moreover, del Rivero positions her body over Babitz's image, such that she becomes the one playing with Duchamp.

The artist enters into language games as well in *Les Amoureuses*. Unlike Babitz, who seems to be literally enacting the role of the "Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors" (mentioned in the alternate longer title of Duchamp's *Large Glass* [1915-23] that also shares the photo), del Rivero remains clothed.³⁵ While he appears to be in the masculine guise of Marcel in the image, del Rivero interpellates him with the name of his feminine alter ego—albeit with an extra "r". The logic of her operations parallels the lessons about translation of gender provided by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*: "If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes."³⁶ Del Rivero's title, a deferred caption, implies that similarly Duchamp is the same person, only now a woman.³⁷ Furthermore, as the work's title includes a deviant spelling, "Rrrose" (potentially a pun on its own erroneous status) and *Les Amoureuses* means feminine gendered lovers, the project linguistically implies a queer relationship with Duchamp. The curator Rita Gonzalez argues that Duchamp is a particularly apt forebear for del Rivero to engage with given his own blurring of gender lines with his female alter-ego Rrose Selavy. She suggests that, at least at the end of the 20th century, the Dadaist's gender transgressions had not been adequately addressed by art historians; instead, artists like del Rivero were pioneers in recuperating these

³⁵ In the same vein, del Rivero contested the singular authority of a "great" Spanish master when she recreated Diego Velazquez's classic *Las Hilanderas* (the Spinners) (c.1657) as a photographic tableau vivant in Elena del Rivero, *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, 2001.

³⁶ For an extended discussion of Woolf's text see Arthur C. Danto, "Translation and Betrayal," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 32 (Autumn, 1997): 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

heretical histories, as they produced works that investigated them and brought them to light.³⁸ Indeed, seen from the vantage of 2020, it is difficult not to think of her work as complex dialectical image. For those versed in more contemporary art-historical liturgy, reading “Rrose” inevitably prompts the picturing of Man Ray’s photos of Duchamp, with painted lips, peering over a fur collar and sporting a natty hat.

Though contestatory, del Rivero’s heretical quotations are based on admiration too. They are dialectical homages (involving an antithesis and synthesis of their targets)—more accurately the kind of “collecting, recycling, reshaping and juxtaposing” that the editors of *Heresies* called “femmage”—rather than outright censures.³⁹ Importantly, Del Rivero’s method of claiming and repurposing already extant forms and language owes much to Duchamp. In his notes about and around the *Large Glass*, *The Green Box* (1935), a series of fragmentary missives to future artists and art historians, Duchamp affirms:

The readymade can later be looked for (with all kinds of delays). —The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendez-vous.

Also the serial characteristic of the readymade.⁴⁰

³⁸ Rita Gonzalez, “How to Feed and Sustain a Fragment,” in *At the Curve of the World* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1999), excerpted in Girst, “Elena del Rivero and Marcel Duchamp: Les Amoureuses.”

³⁹ See “From the Editors,” *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics* 1, no. 4 (1978), 2. They affirm “femmage” is “the practice of collecting, recycling, reshaping and juxtaposing the artifacts of everyday life, a mode echoed in our production of this magazine.”

⁴⁰ Marcel Duchamp, *The Green Box*, Note 4.1 (1935), cited and translated in Hector Obalk, “The Unfindable Readymade,” *Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 2.1 (May 2000), https://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html.

Letter from Home: A Rendez-vous, specifically intended to invoke the late French artist, was the title of a 2015 exhibition at Josée Bienvenu Gallery of her works with dishtowel motifs made up to that point.⁴¹ By citing this particular line, del Rivero implies that “Letter from Home” is a corresponding series of meetings, deferred in time. The encounters she stages are manifold: between high art and domestic material culture, between the saints of canonical modernism and herself (as well as other more contemporary interlocutors); between missive-artwork and receptive audience.

Performative Pronouncements: Dwelling and Labor

Del Rivero’s *[Swi:t] Home* (2001), the artist’s first engagement with the dishtowel form, involved a year-long, creation process (fig. 5). Del Rivero’s Cedar Street studio and residence formed the project’s matrix and crucible. For six months, between July 3, 2000 and early 2001, 20 sheets of hand-made abaca paper (each 58" x 38") covered the apartment’s floors, including the landing connecting her home to the stairwell (figs. 6, 7, 8).⁴² These sheets as a whole approached a fragmented 1:1 scale map, which had started to merge with the real estate it occupied. The paper laid on the floor wore away as a result of flows of human traffic, the movements of residents and visitors (from friends to messengers delivering packages); it absorbed all kinds of domestic messes and materials by the end of its half-life with del Rivero. At this point she brought it back to Dieu

⁴¹ Josée Bienvenu Gallery, “Elena del Rivero Letter from Home: a rendez-vous,” *Josée Bienvenu Gallery*, April 16 – May 23, 2015, accessed on November 14, 2017, <http://www.joseebienvenugallery.com/exhibitions/elena-del-rivero2>.

⁴² For more about the project, see Elizabeth Finch, “The Drawing as Instrument,” *Drawing Papers 20: Performance Drawings* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2001) and Finch, “A Conversation between Elena del Rivero and Elizabeth Finch,” *DOCUMENTACIONES: Elena del Rivero*, curated by Javier Panero (Salamanca: Centro Histórico Universidad de Salamanca, 2002).

Donné Papermill (Brooklyn, NY), where the tears were repaired with new pulp and the sheets bathed, dried, and pressed again. The folios developed scarring, as the replacement areas woven into their fabric are a slightly darker beige tone.⁴³ In the next half year she worked with assistants to transform the partially “healed” paper into a series of five massive dishtowels (9’7” x 6’6” each), that were exhibited at the Drawing Center from July 12, 2001 to July 28, 2001.⁴⁴ In addition, she created a para-institution within the institution. An extensive *Reference Library* was shown along with the finished dishtowel-artworks. Her textual repository (which merits far longer treatment than is possible here) included reflections and extensions of the ideas in codex form, including her own *[Swi:t] Home Book of Hours*, a technology that normally regulates prayer activities; a diary with 365 drawings, and documentation of the processes.

Hence, like so many of del Rivero’s artworks, *[Swi:t] Home* spanned distinct epistemes, taxonomies, and involved multiple collaborations. Following the director Catherine de Zegher’s curatorial mandate, it mixed works on paper and performance; the initiative blurred various realms socially coded as divergent—the domestic and public, breaking and mending, housework and artwork. Moreover, it perhaps signals the breakdown in professional and personal boundaries that can occur within the artworld specifically and late-capitalism more generally.

Rather than just involving drawing, which is often characterized by precision and deliberate designs, *[Swi:t] Home* can productively be viewed in relation to printmaking, of both the artistic and bureaucratic variety: spills, stains, tears, and repeated footprints impressed on the paper yield the marks.⁴⁵ Domestic dirt impregnated the folios in much the way that ink enters fibers when

⁴³ Del Rivero selected the abaca paper because she believes its physical qualities are closest to skin. See Del Rivero, “El más relacional hecho arte,” *DUODA: Revista d’Estudis Feministes* 23 (2002): 95.

⁴⁴ Del Rivero, “El más relacional hecho arte,” 92 (my translation).

⁴⁵ Ed Ruscha’s *Stains* (1969), a series of prints-as-besmirchings made from mostly from foodstuffs of materials readily encountered in an American home seems like an important precedent.

sheets are run through a press. The impact of shoe soles created a kind of embossing. In the massive dishtowels, in which the textures of the paper as well as imperfections subtly generate visual interest, there is also a tension between unruly accident and measurement. These marks represent, in some sense, a series of time stamps. A palimpsest of indexes of a long duration, as opposed to a single instant, pock the dishtowels' surfaces.⁴⁶ Further relating to an "aesthetic of administration," Del Rivero tracked the circulation of the different sheets through her home using more clerical forms of representation and record keeping (archived in the *Reference Library*): she maintained a mylar *Floor Plan of Studio-Home* with the sheets' location and produced six hand-made translucent pieces of abaca-based paper, one for each month of the domiciliary incubation, imprinted with bespoke stamps scaled to each folio.⁴⁷ In contrast to administrative registrations of single moments in time, strict regimes of work (and surveillance) seem to be specifically resisted and rejected in *[Swi:t] Home*.

A network of associations conjured up with language games helps provide inroads to *[Swi:t] Home*. The name initially resists comprehension, as it contains a phonetic transcription proper to the pages of a dictionary. Displacing it outside the bounds of this technology of language renders it less familiar (non-native English speakers, more accustomed to searching out English pronunciation may find the title to be less of a stumbling block). The title can be understood as "sweet" and "suite": it alludes to her serial grouping of related artistic output, the five dishtowels, which, in turn, by their monstrous size undercut "sweetness." Del Rivero attributes her poetic explorations and embraces of the apparently contradictory associations of "home" to the influence

⁴⁶ The time stamp is a printed convention that migrated from workplace bureaucracies into video and photo technology.

⁴⁷ This term hails from Benjamin Buchloh's descriptions of early conceptual art in the classic essay "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter 1990): 105-143.

of Cixous.⁴⁸ *[Swi:t] Home* also points to language as performed utterance and distinct kinds of domestic craft; the full pronouncement, “home sweet home,” is most often encountered when spoken aloud upon the return for a journey or when rendered on all manner of domestic textiles and needlework.

[Swi:t] Home was “homemade,” as the artist joked: her dwelling—equally as noun and verb—determined its final form.⁴⁹ The indexes of everyday life provide the expansive folios with their texture. Del Rivero’s use of puns to provide insights continue, as she states the dishtowels were made “from scratch”—a turn of phrase typically associated with the creation of food.⁵⁰ It often gets deployed in relation to the performance of a bourgeois ideal (and more recently a foodie one) of “good housekeeping.” Making a dish “from scratch” indicates its authenticity and the maker’s—traditionally a housewife’s—available time and implies her, his, or their lack of necessity to work outside the home. The food prepared by domestic servants could have the adjective appended as a way of generating value too. Relocating the dishtowels to the sphere of art licenses a more poetic working through of their meanings and associations, which in turn drift toward a kind of politics of the home.

If the first six-months saw John-Cage-inspired mining of everyday life for art and an associated explosion of performance (including an “elevation” of cleaning toilets into art), the second period of *[Swi:t] Home*’s creation introduced a narrower definition of performance, foregrounding labor—especially the maintenance work of mending, cleaning, folding, and sewing designs and embellishments, which traditionally are the bailiwick of women in the domestic

⁴⁸ Del Rivero in conversation with the author, August 11, 2020.

⁴⁹ Del Rivero, “El más relacional hecho arte,” 95 (my translation); del Rivero uses the Spanish term, “*casera*,” which also etymologically links to “home” (*casa*).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sphere.⁵¹ As the entire project was framed by the notion of performance, and del Rivero explicitly marked various phases, she militated to prompt a consideration of repair and the artistic labor (including that of her assistants) as elements of performance (fig. 9). This humble gesture, nonetheless has important implications; when the dishtowels were translated and transposed to the Drawing Center's white-walled gallery, the normally invisible upstream aspects of the dishtowel's creation were held up for contemplation as they formed part of the "performance."

In an account of [*Swi:t*] *Home* published in 2002, del Rivero mentions her desire to use the "leftovers" of the paper led her to yet another performance of labor and craft. The director of programs at Dieu Donn , Mina Takahasi, told del Rivero about *shifu*, a technique for mixing silk and paper into strands.⁵² Inspired by this idea, the artist translated the process to meet her reality, and embarked on the first phases of the performance that would be entitled *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, a paracitation of Diego Velazquez in which real women replaced his mythological representations. She used a domestic or office paper shredder to turn the remaining pieces into ribbons, which were in turn moistened and rolled up into thread. Del Rivero realized she would be unable to complete all of the rolling herself and so she tapped her network of friends, located in Europe, Latin America, and Canada, and used the postal system to send them shredded paper, which they returned to her by mail.⁵³ Although the protocol was the same, each person's paper thread was slightly different in texture. Del Rivero wove all of them together in a nest that became the centerpiece of a performance at Dieu Donn . Donning all white, del Rivero and four other women rolled paper ribbons into thread while a sonic accompaniment flooded the space. In tandem

⁵¹ I am thinking about *4'33"* as well as Cage's reflections on theatre entering into everyday life in John Cage, Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter, 1965: 50-72.

⁵² Del Rivero, "'El m s relacional hecho arte,'" 95

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 96.

with the outfits, the weaving of fabric suggests the potential for dwelling in the work itself. Once more, the collaborative work of making and reusing took center stage.

As the 2020 confinement necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic has proven, our relationship to home is not always so sweet. The devastation of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks made the apartment that birthed *[Swi:t] Home* uninhabitable. Del Rivero was eventually allowed to return to recover the scraps of her artwork that had been exposed to the elements. As part of a process of working through the trauma of the loss of her dwelling and her work, she produced *[Swi:t] Home: A Chant* (2001-2006). In some sense, it is a kind of uncanny double of *[Swi:t] Home*. The uncanny is that particular kind of familiar thing made strange and terrifying that preoccupied Sigmund Freud in his essay of the same name.⁵⁴ In German the term for uncanny (*unheimlich*), literally means unhomely—and Freud teases out the relevance of this linguistic connection to domestic spaces. Seemingly a giant dress train suspended from the ceiling and imposingly occupying space, *[Swi:t] Home: A Chant* contains shards of the artist's domestic and business records and other assorted fragments hand-sewn to gauzy, white fabric (FIG:). It quite literally is a marker of her unhoming.

As well as her haunting material assemblage, del Rivero created a further redoubling: *The Archive of Dust*, a record of each remnant she collected; this 9/11 repository was exhibited for the first time along with *[Swi:t] Home: A Chant* at the Naves Matadero in Madrid in 2019 (fig. 10).⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919) in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Classics, EBooks, 2003), unpaginated, https://books.google.es/books?id=8f3-uKZOHeK&pg=PT5&dq=Freud,+%E2%80%9CThe+%E2%80%98Uncanny%E2%80%99%E2%80%9D&hl=es&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=Freud%2C%20%E2%80%9CThe%20%E2%80%98Uncanny%E2%80%99%E2%80%9D&f=false.

⁵⁵ Mateo Feijoo organized this 2019 exhibition of *The Archive of Dust*, which was the first time the nearly complete archive was shown.

[Swi:t] Home (2003), a suite involving a reproduction of a color drawing with four prints (in an edition of 20), which juxtapose various indexes of absences—photo-etched images of the ruined apartment with embossed floor

As “archive” has its etymological roots in the Greek ἀρχεῖον (arkheîon, “town hall”), this publicly displayed domicile for domestic documents is a structure with political foundations. The title smacks of Duchamp--concretely, Man Ray’s photo of Duchamp’s *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, Dust Breeding* (1920); *The Green Box*, his build-up of scraps of paper around same work, is also an instance of an archival artwork. The fact that del Rivero inventoried every trace she collected shifts the focus of her work from solely the material indexes of trauma that adorn *[Swi:t] Home: A Chant*, toward performed process of picking up the pieces.

Ms. Translation: From the Kitchen to the White Cube, from Textiles to “The Big Canvas”

In the part of this century there began to appear, first in France and then in Russia and Holland, a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts ever since. Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.⁵⁶

With these words Rosalind Krauss begins her essay on grids within the visual arts. The grid is a central form to modernism. As Kraus points out, formalist genealogies of art often trace a history of grids in painting, moving from their appearance in the output of Paul Cézanne, to its adoption by Pablo Picasso and George Braque, to becoming Piet Mondrian central motif, up to its renewal in the output of Jasper Johns and Max Bill, and arriving at the minimalist grids of Sol

plans—could be seen as yet another redoubling. One set can be found in the collection of Hudson County Community College, see <https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/hudson-county-community-college-foundation-art-collection/artwork/swi-t-home?collection=hispanic-american-artist>.

Del Rivero, “El más relacional hecho arte,” 93.

⁵⁶ Krauss, 50.

LeWitt. Perhaps misused in del Rivero's hands, its "will to silence" is broken. While the grid has been present in modern art since the late-nineteenth century, it appears even earlier in the history of domestic spaces. By bringing dishtowels to the white cube, Del Rivero effectively insinuates them into a conversation with the output a litany of "great" male arts. Furthermore, she proposes that the grid be something more fertile than the historic avant-gardes analyzed by Krauss allowed: a matrix, a word whose etymology implicates female creativity and the "womb." New meanings are brought to term in Del Rivero's "Letters from Home."

With her artworks, there is an allegorical gestation of the artistic, political, and historical associations of the abstract grid and the dishtowel. By articulating these divergent traditions (painting and domestic textiles) in each other's terms, del Rivero undertakes a species of mistranslation. She is the type of translator-traitor Arthur Danto mentions in "Translation and Betrayal."⁵⁷ Danto holds that translation is a question of power: "'Betrayal' is itself a very powerful term to characterize the behavior of the translator, who, by knowing the language, must be within the magic circle of knowers and by translating the language opens the circle to the laity."⁵⁸ In del Rivero's "Letter from Home," the operation is in some sense inverted; the "lay" fabric form of the dishtowel transforms into the "magic" language of high-brow art, and thus, exploding the "circle of knowers" from within: by translating dishtowels into gridded paintings, such paintings are revealed to merely be one more form of decorated textile. Moreover, because of the feminist aesthetics and politics that undergird her maneuvering, the logic of her work might recall that of the magazine *Ms.* Founded in 1971 by Gloria Steinem and Letty Cottin Pogrebin, the periodical's intention was to question the norms expected of women by society and in family life. Arguably a

⁵⁷ Arthur C. Danto, "Translation and Betrayal," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 32 (Autumn, 1997): 61-63

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

related impulse to publicize and interrogate the role of women in art and society is precisely why del Rivero undertakes her artistic translations as well.⁵⁹

Significant scholarly writing on the origins of tea towels and dishtowels is scarce. The domestic gridded tea towels and dishtowels are the eventual result of international trade routes. Systems of fabric production and economics often interweave. Bryan-Wilson notes that “textiles suffuse Marx’s theories about use value and the commodity.”⁶⁰ The now ubiquitous European tea towels originated with the rise of the tea trade in the 18th century between China and European nations, perhaps most importantly Britain (whose Imperial activities also moved tea around the globe). With the rise of tea drinking, the accoutrements of the tea service became increasingly common household elements by the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Indeed, this was particularly true in the North American Colonies. A visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing, which displays countless numbers of silver implements related to tea as well as porcelain services, reveals the significant expenditure on implements related to rituals of tea drinking in the early history and prehistory of the United States. The tea towel was particular type of woven linen employed by the lady of the house for drying her tea set, apparently a job servants could not be trusted with.⁶¹ These textiles were often further decorated with embroidered designs. From at least the mid-19th century, the type of checked and gridded tea towels that are still familiar today have

⁵⁹ Del Rivero’s techniques of Ms. Translation extends beyond a critique of painting in *Sewing Minimalism* (1994-95) and *Dancing with Minimalism* (1996). As Elizabeth Finch has argued, by evoking American minimalism in textiles, she inflected the style—generally the purview of male artists (with the exceptions of Judy Chicago and Anne Truitt)—with a feminine character. Moreover, by emphasizing performance (in dance and the labor of sewing), she perhaps alludes to the origins of some of Robert Morris’s minimal forms as stage sets for Simoné Forti and points to the labor of fabrication that in the case of Donald Judd or Sol LeWitt no longer was requisite to authorship. Finch suggests that Rivero’s repeated, modular forms, and her use of zippers and nylon tulle, represent a critique of the “masculine look of American minimalism.” See Elizabeth Finch, “Elena del Rivero’s Correspondences,” 3.

⁶⁰ Bryan-Wilson, 7.

⁶¹ See Jessica Cumberbatch Anderson, “What the Heck are Tea Towels, Anyway?” *Huffington Post: Home*, November 12, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/12/what-are-tea-towels_n_6135252.html

been mass produced and increasingly employed for drying all kinds of dishes.⁶² In the twentieth-century dishtowels (with all kinds of patterns) became ubiquitous items in European and American households. They shifted from the purview of elites to become associated with a more bourgeois or even lower class domestic sensibility: from the 1950s onwards, tea towels increasingly were created for fund raising and sold as inexpensive tourist souvenirs.⁶³ Thus, dishtowels and tea towels can be considered among the “handicrafts and decorations [that have] always been considered inferior, commonplace” that are at the core of traditional notions of a “feminine aesthetic” according to literary critic Silvia Bovenschen writing in *Heresies*.⁶⁴

These common, inexpensive geometric dishtowels are precisely those that del Rivero produces in oil paint, weaving together forms of culture that normally are considered separate: “lowly” domestic textiles and “high-brow” modernist paintings. She decorates her “Letter from Home” canvases with crosses, stripes, and variations on grids. *Letter from Home (for Marcel Duchamp)* (2017) is a long, thin canvas with two sets of parallel red lines running up and down its edges. *Letter from Home (for Marcel Broodthaers)* (2017) recalls the cross of St George. *Letter from Home (for Walter Benjamin)* (2017), has a central trio of teal and red lines flanked by thin blue stripes on the edges. A series of thin evenly spaced horizontal red lines, interspersed on either side by a pairing of lines—a thick ochre and thin blue—on either edge decorate *Letter from Home (for Stéphane Mallarmé)* (2017); it recalls a piece of writing paper or a garishly colored Agnes Martin. Del Rivero amended a stitched handle to all of these, which makes them hang in a domestic fashion from a peg.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See Marnie Fogg, *The Art of the Tea Towel* (London: Pavillion Books, 2018) and Richard Till, *Every Tea Towel Tells a Story* (New Orleans: Renaissance Publishing, 2010).

⁶⁴ Silvia Bovenschen, “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic,” *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Arts & Politics* 1, no. 4 (1978): 13.

Rather than be stretched taught on the wall, many drape down in three-dimension triangular bunches. *Letter from Home (for Louis Kahn)* is a wall-sized double racing stripe dishtowel, which is scaled up to compete with and cover up architecture. In almost every case, del Rivero adds stains and marks to the canvases grinding in dirt and soaking up liquid, such that they show indexes of use, of dwelling (fig. 11). While we might think these traces of the past are domestic, attempts at “deliberate accidents” also have a role in the history of art. Leonardo recommended artists contemplate stains as inspiration for inventing new forms: “If you look upon an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, etc. Out of this confused mass of objects, the mind will be furnished with an abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new.”⁶⁵

Indeed, as much as they could seem to be at home in the kitchen, del Rivero’s canvases also intersect with the history of modernism in provocative ways. The psychotherapist and art historian Rozsika Parker argues that handwork, such as embroidery, “has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal...but it has also proved a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity.”⁶⁶ It is both of Parker’s notions that she hopes to evoke, by her production of tea towel forms. Del Rivero’s textiles are weapons in that they cut down the myth of the “genius” of white, male artists who enjoyed success in the mid-twentieth century by exposing the parallels

⁶⁵ See Leonardo cited in Christopher Turner, “The Deliberate Accident in Art,” *Tate Etc.* 21 (Spring 2011): circuit.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-21-spring-2011/deliberate-accident-art

⁶⁶ Parker cited in Bryan-Wilson, 9.

between painting and domestic material culture; thus, femininity expands beyond the bounds of the kitchen and modernist aesthetics come into focus in the home.⁶⁷

Del Rivero's artworks rattle sabers with conventional accounts of modernism as "Letter from Home" brings to the fore one of the repressed aspects of "high art": paintings are really just stained swathes/tracts of fabric. Arguably, Clement Greenberg's notion of "pictorial space," the idea that a mark on a support yields an illusion of figure superimposed upon ground is one final defense against seeing uncovered canvases for the materials they literally are made from.⁶⁸ Del Rivero's grids posit that dishtowels designs could possess this kind of illusionistic dimensionality when put in conversation with abstract canvases. Furthermore, when taken in conjunction with del Rivero's paintings, Greenberg's affirmation, "thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture — though not necessarily a successful one", takes on new significances, somewhat alien to the arch-modernist critic's intents: his words come to teach that painting—though perhaps not always good painting—consists of the manipulation of cloth.⁶⁹ By making dishtowels that "exist as a picture," her "Letter from Home" prompts the imagining of an extension of abstract representation to the racks and hooks of the kitchen, where towels can typically be found extended and displayed. Because of their homely elements, the works in "Letter from Home" do not initially read purely as paintings, so much as domestic matter enlarged and "out of place."⁷⁰ Precisely for this reason, they can be understood as slightly uncanny. The spatial translation from the kitchen

⁶⁷ She marked all of the 2017 "Letters from Home" with "100% Modernism Surveillance Cotton" (mimicking the "100% Cotton Made in France" found on standard dishtowels), alluding to the systems of vision and discipline that uphold patriarchal dominance in culture.

⁶⁸ See Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 88

⁶⁹ Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" (1962), *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131.

⁷⁰ I refer here to the definition of "dirt"—perhaps coined by Hegel—and made popular by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), see especially 35-36; 165.

into the white cube does not just see the dishtowels unhomed (see discussion above), but additionally renders strange their new gallery location.

The theatre historian Marcia Blumberg signals the dual nature of the kitchen: “the domestic kitchen is a place often evocative of physical and emotional nourishment, gastronomic delight and social interaction. Serving as a setting for contemporary plays...the kitchen may form a *crucible* for family and societal *crises*.”⁷¹ Del Rivero’s para-citational works both nourish their hosts and raise questions about the type of work that is valued in their spaces. When imagining the supposedly brave experiments in abstraction by the “heroic” vanguard artists in the kitchen-crucible tests such claims, converting them into decidedly more quotidian gestures. Setting Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis’s impregnations of their canvases with stains and pours into a conversation with their domestic relatives enables a reviewing of their efforts as merely sullied or decorated textiles (the name of one of Louis’s mode of working, the Unfurleds, evokes fabric movement). Of course this did possibly happen, as works by the two artists did really grace the walls of homes, including Greenberg’s own apartment.⁷²

Returning to Blumberg, the family resemblance of some avant-garde creations to more decorative interior domestic elements (we might remember Harold Rosenberg’s “apocalyptic wallpaper”) yielded a crisis of sorts.⁷³ Indeed, Clement Greenberg viewed the development of the “all-over” as provoking the “crisis of the easel picture”; this crisis he argued, saw “the dissolution

⁷¹ Marcia Blumberg, "Domestic Place as Contestatory Space: the Kitchen as Catalyst and Crucible," *New Theatre Quarterly* 55: Vol. 14, Part 3 (August 1998): 195 (my emphasis).

⁷² See Clement Greenberg, "Features/Articles/People: Private Lives—With Art: A Famous Art Critic's Collection," *Vogue*, January 15, 1964, 92-95. Also see Alex J. Taylor, 'Greenberg's Taste', in Alex J. Taylor (ed.), *In Focus: Gift 1961–2* by Kenneth Noland, Tate Research Publication, 2017, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/gift-kenneth-noland/greenbergs-taste>, accessed 10 August 2020.

⁷³ Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News*, vol. 51, no. 8 (December 1952), 22-23; 48-50.

of the pictorial into sheer texture,” which gave rise to “the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been, literally, exhausted and invalidated; that no area or order of experience is intrinsically superior, on any final scale of values, to any other area or order of experience.”⁷⁴ Del Rivero’s canvases bring the repressed decorative aspects of modern art to the fore by stripping abstraction of its overdetermined masculinity.⁷⁵ One only need consider Nina Leen’s 1951 photo of “The Irascibles” or Pollock’s August 8, 1949 *Life Magazine* spread, in which he glowers at spectators, arms crossed, and with cigarette hanging from the right corner of his mouth to see macho posturing linked to the American vanguard.

Another mid-twentieth century commentator on painting, E.C. Goosen, focused on its increasingly large-scale painting nearly simultaneously. Goosen describes “the vision of the two- or three- color picture.” Del Rivero’s stripes and grids in their spare colors seem like an improper iteration of this tendency. By her augmentation of the dishtowel form to a more expansive painterly scale, del Rivero resolves high modernism and domesticity. We must remember that a significant amount of masculine posturing accompanied the production of abstract expressionist paintings. Producing “the Big Canvas” out of a feminine-coded material, Del Rivero dialectically inflects art history with a new cast.⁷⁶

Origins and Anti-Originality: The Dedications and Directions of “Letter from Home”

⁷⁴ Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1948) in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 157

⁷⁵ For a related art-historical analysis, see Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

⁷⁶ See E. C. Goossen, “The Big Canvas,” *Art International*, vol, 2, no. 8 (November 1958): 45-47.

As in *Les Amoureuses*, the works in “Letter from Home” as well grapple with artistic genealogies. Beginning in 2016, del Rivero has dedicated nearly every dishtowel painting to a major male modernist figure, from Walter Benjamin, to Aby Warburg, to Lois Kahn, to Stephane Mallarme, to Marcel Broodthaers, and—of course—to Marcel Duchamp. Although we might consider del Rivero to be painting herself into the pantheon of modernism by her invocations, this is not her intent. The artist states, “I am not measuring myself against Duchamp; I am simply outlining a possible dialogue through difference, one that, I think, Luce Irigaray might approve of.”⁷⁷ Her current “letters” are missives targeted toward exchange and contact.

Letter from Home (for Marcel Duchamp) (2017) (fig. 12), the thin rectangular painting mentioned above, includes the monogram “MD,” a kind claiming that is quaint in some fashion and very much related to the private sphere. Monograms tend to be applied to intimate personal items like handbags, pajamas, bedding, and towels. However, the inclusion of MD is also a kind of counterfeit signature, one which recalls the multiplication of the initials MB by another one of del Rivero’s subjects, Marcel Broodthaers. Broodthaers’s *La Signature, Serie 1* (1969) saw the Belgian trickster artist-poet undercutting his own authorial authority by absurdly serially producing his supposedly unique mark; his initials too drift very close to MD (fig. 13). Furthermore, by marking MD on her work, del Rivero turns Marcel Duchamp the author figure into a readymade he becomes an R.Mutt, the pseudonym Duchamp employed to sign his notorious *Fountain* (1917).

Del Rivero invocation of Duchamp’s name could equally suggest that she is channeling the older artist. She conjures up a lesser-known corner of Duchamp’s output: his *Couple of*

⁷⁷ Del Rivero, “Artist Statement for *[Swi:t] Home* and *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*,” cited in Thomas Girst, “Elena del Rivero and Marcel Duchamp: *Les Amoureuses*.”

Laundress' Aprons (1959), two objects made of cloth and fur, one with a penis and the other a vagina, that appear to be potholders rendered in plaid. Moreover, from at least the time of *[Swi:t] Home*, Duchamp's links to textiles in his multilingual wordplay in *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913-14) has concerned del Rivero.⁷⁸ "Stoppage" in French refers to an "invisible mend," a sewn repair of fabric in a garment. Her work opens up a revisionist panorama of the Dadaist. She points to the intimate and domestic nature of so many of Duchamp's works, which obviate household items normal uses, perhaps best exemplified by *Trap (Trebuchet)* (1917) and *Door, 11 rue Larrey* (1927).

In relation to the notion of del Rivero as art-historical medium, we should home in upon the series of stains on the canvas. Rather than produce these in oil paint, they are rendered in red wine. These sullying marks are like readymades, *presentation* not *representation*. They also index a process of imbibing. Drinking wine would also be necessary to turn the *Bottle Rack* (1914) back into a domestic object employed to dry out cleaned empty bottles for reuse. Duchamp himself played with the idea he was a spirit to be consumed: his signature appeared on a branded wine label on the cover illustration of the surrealist magazine *View*, in a special 1945 edition dedicated to the artist (fig. 14).

Finally, the discolored splotches (which have browned over time) might additionally evoke Duchamp's own painting as stain on fabric: *Paysage Fautif (Faulty Landscape)* (1946) (fig. 15), a work realized in his own semen on the artificial textile astralon backed with black satin. Within the history of painting, especially in the years just following Duchamp's "bad" landscape, metaphors connecting sexual potency to artistic creation (which Duchamp anticipated, literally),

⁷⁸ See Del Rivero, *Reference Library* for *[Swi:t] Home*, which contains a volume titled the *Book of Invisible Mends*.

coursed through the discourse, especially around Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.⁷⁹ Del Rivero's stains could be an ironic critique of vision of artistic and sexual potency (which is also a possibility with Duchamp's painting-cum-stain), but they also relate to a more sensible kind of mopping up. The cleaning of messes (as well as the treatment of stains) often falls into the category of feminine domestic labor, maintenance activity that the Spanish-American artist here transubstantiates into art-work.

Del Rivero's most recent "Letters from Home: Suffrage" (2019-20) are dishtowel-artworks (six canvases and a nylon flag) that also involve spilling and staining and cleaning up, and mending (fig. 16). Given the temporal proximity of their creation to the 2020 centennial of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, which gave American women the right to vote, all the *Letter from Home: Suffrage* canvases register a specific history: that of the legislation of women's suffrage in the United States with the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified on August 18, 1920. Sans-serif texts, respectively "SUFFRAGE" and "1920", appear clearly legible on towels 02 and 03.⁸⁰ Like the texture of *[Swi:t] Home*, these numbers and letters are in a sense time stamps marking history. However, by starting this naming practice in 2019, and dedicating the artworks to an international assortment of (mostly male) figures (01 to Yasujirō Ozu, 02 to Frederick Douglass, 03 to Nelson Mandela, 04 to "an unrequited love"—whose gender is not clear, 05 to Kafka, and 06 to Mary Magdalene), del Rivero raises questions about whose right to vote she is alluding to. For example, the canvas dedicated to Mandela has a mended tear in the shape of the African continent; in this context, "1920" signals more than the past of the US, but also threads through

⁷⁹ For an account of innuendo in art criticism, see Anna Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript," *RES* 24 (Autumn 1993), 98-100.

⁸⁰ Other personalized texts mimicking the "100% Cotton Made in France" can be read on the others; for example, the Yasujirō Ozu dishtowel has "100% Pure Cotton in Transition"—referring to the film director's signature mode of changing scenes (with shots of static objects).

notable events in Pan-African history—such as the expansion of the South African Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) to other African nations.⁸¹

In the process of making the works around the anniversary, the artist became increasingly aware of the fact that in practice women's suffrage often meant white, upper and middle class women's suffrage; people of color as well as residents of US Territories, continued to be excluded from American democracy. Del Rivero's sullyng of all of the suffrage towels resonates with the fraught nature of commemorating a positive yet exclusionary event: she reflects the fact that the centennial is besmirched and must not be recollected as pure celebration by sullyng her flag.

Letter from Home: Suffrage, 02 to Frederick Douglass (fig. 17) incorporates wine, bleach, turmeric, and stitching that explicitly digs into political as well as aesthetic activity. Douglass is best known for his anti-slavery activism. Nonetheless, he was also an important advocate for women's rights; he stated: "When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of women, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act."⁸² The Black activist gets another afterlife when channeled in the context of del Rivero's artwork today. His commitment to women's suffrage and ideas about (photographic) image making and the politics of representation (and perhaps too Donald Trump's implication that Douglass was still alive at a ceremony celebrating the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2017, which was one of the particularly memorable early gaffes of the administration) rise out of the past.⁸³ And indeed, as an early theorist of photography and one of

⁸¹ The ICU was an African corollary to the International Workers of the World (IWW), which provided the model for the ICU.

⁸² Frederick Douglass in David Cheesebrough, *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Publishing, 1998), 36.

⁸³ See Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

the most often photographed people in the world, Douglass's various dimensions must be recuperated. As his activities transcended anti-slavery and Black rights activism, he should be recognized not solely for his activism, but as a key figure of American modernism. Here, rather than critique received history, Del Rivero implies that the canon must be expanded.

In all of the *Letter from Home: Suffrage* artworks Del Rivero's alterations of scale and naming must be grasped as a feminist reworking, perhaps working through (and over), of the ideas of each addressee, which are absorbed into the fabric of her dishtowels. Absorption is an additive and generative process. These works should certainly not be thought to foreclose discourse around these modern artists, architects, and writers, but instead to engender connections, like those I have outlined above. "Letter from Home" asks spectators to enter into a game of hide and seek and search out metaphoric resonances and intersections.

Burning Allegories: Banners and the State of the Union

Del Rivero has undertaken yet one more translation in the past five years. She has begun to fabricate flags based on dishtowels that extend her artistic missives and revisionist mission into public spaces. One of the earliest versions of this incantation of "Letter from Home" was a guerilla 2015 installation, in which del Rivero draped her textiles from trees, in the public space of Tompkins Square Park (fig. 18). The most recent are a multi-platform banner, in an edition of 19 (an allusion to the written structure of the "supreme law of the land"), entitled *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* (fig. 19). Like her other recent works in the series, these flags and commemorate the anniversary of the 19th amendment; they link the distinct locations where they are displayed in a

feminist union.⁸⁴ Especially when placed in exterior spaces, they perform a further transposition from the inside to outside, domestic to public. Beyond serving as allegories for women's political agency and entrée into the public sphere, del Rivero's flags conjure up Jacques Derrida's insights about missives and missiles.⁸⁵ They are a salvo of supplements, which stake a feminine (and feminist) claim on the constellation of sites they occupy and supplant.

The *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* banner bears a formal resemblance to the *Letter from Home* dedicated to Marcel Duchamp described earlier. The outdoor work combines a crisp, claret red triple rectangle grid that coexists with irregular burgundy stains on a white fabric ground. Del Rivero capitalizes on the fact that the geometric forms of the torchon-dishtowel are quite similar to the fields of flat color encountered in numerous national flags. This morphological link to established symbols of authority helps her banners achieve a kind of uncanny quality; traditional expectations about textiles that should be found in public are short-circuited. For example, encountering a giant, blemished dishtowel (a staple of intimate, domestic spaces) paired with the red and gold banner of Spain in the Consulate General of New York arguably provokes a slight shock (fig. 20). Users of civic institutions and the built environment might be jolted into interrogating their relations and assumptions about the traditionally feminine coded forms and other feminine practices and customs.

Flags often serve as metonyms of national or group identity; and thus, when displayed they are in a sense condensers (maybe even catalyzers) of "imagined communities"--the term political scientist Benedict Anderson coined to describe the constructed sense of connection felt by individuals who perceive themselves part of a group (despite their economic, religious, or ethnic

⁸⁴ This turn of phrase hails from Article VI of the US Constitution.

⁸⁵ See Walter Benjamin in my epigraph.

and racial differences and the fact they might never actually meet).⁸⁶ Anderson's account focused on the role of what he called "print-capitalism" in the fabrication of modern nationalism and nation states.⁸⁷ However, his notion of the "imagined community" can be applied to understand other collective identities produced by shared rituals and the consumption of common mediated or mass-mediated content. These range from fandoms of musicians of sports teams (hammered home with the one common term for Boston's baseball fans: "Red Sox Nation"), to the religious faithful, to members of political parties, to the art world. Rather than uphold any established form of nationalism, Del Rivero's flags instead give pause. Indeed, the fact they could disrupt the "sanctity" of "straight" flags was a reason some centers gave me when rejecting offers to host the project.

The potential to blur boundaries, publicize (aesthetic) information to wider audiences, and bring into being symbols that could hail from alternative realities are qualities that have drawn other artists (quite regularly men) to create banners as a form for contemporary art. Group Zero made black flags emblazoned with "Zero" in white for their happenings from the late 50s. Daniel Buren's *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973) saw the French artist stringing together striped banners that began in the John Weber Gallery (where del Rivero would show her work 22 years later) and exited out the window to span a Lower Manhattan street. More recent examples of artwork-flags standing against nationalism come in Ai Wei Wei's 2018 *Flag for Human Rights* and Tanya Bruguera's *Dignity Has No Nationality* (2017).

⁸⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1983/2006), 5-7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 18, 36-38.

Of the numerous possible artistic forebears working with flags, it is David Hammons, an artist who del Rivero very much admires (and who she has encountered in social situations over the years), whose precedent she might aspire to follow most closely: Hammons's *African American Flag* (1990), one of the five he editioned, has long flown on the facade of the Studio Museum in Harlem. It is one most successful examples of an artwork-flag that links to a group identity.⁸⁸ The work shifts the US flag design toward a more Garveyite palette; the stars and stripes that are normally white appear in black and the upper left blue quadrant is green. *African American Flag* has enjoyed careers in various contexts beyond the limits of the artworld, which indicate its political success. Miniature versions are sold on the streets of Harlem, particularly coinciding with New York's African American Day Parade. In early June of 2020, Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Louisville, KY flew the banner at protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.⁸⁹ Similarly, because of the way flags and dishtowels normally signify, the placement of an admixture of both, *Letter from Home (Suffrage)*, in public could enable those who register these pendants to imagine them as the colors of a feminine or feminist polity. Ideally the works would spark the imagining of a new imagined community—a feminist collective in some sense willed into becoming by spectators of the artwork.⁹⁰

In del Rivero's projects, the flag must also be seen to evoke a longer history of feminist militancy. Banners paraded through the streets formed an essential part of manifestations in favor of women's suffrage.⁹¹ The color palette for her flags--burgundy and pink on white--evokes a

⁸⁸ I have had discussions about Hammons's work with del Rivero on multiple occasions.

⁸⁹ See Luke Sharrett's documentation of Deandrea Barber with the African American flag illustrating the report "In Photos: Protesters March in Cities Across America," *New York Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/pictures-george-floyd-protests-photos.html>.

⁹⁰ The idea of a flag being used to rewrite history and created for an identity to crystalize around is not without precedent: these factors seem to have been the motivation for the 20th-century resurrection of the Confederate Battle Flag by the KKK and Southern Democrats.

⁹¹ Bryan-Wilson, 9, 31.

variety of historical deployments of similar hues. White was the dominant color worn by suffragettes in the United States and United Kingdom. Del Rivero's spare design also recalls the bold mauve stripes found on the "Votes for Women" sashes and buttons. The artist's moves to translate textiles from the domestic to the public sphere as well resonate with more contemporary feminist activism. In 1962 Women Strike for Peace (WSP), an anti-nuclear arms movement, draped a massive dishtowel with signatures on the fence of the White House.⁹² The iconic pink knitted "pussy hats" of January 2017's women's marches, used textiles and feminine-coded craft in order to protest of the sexist regime of Donald Trump currently controlling the White House. We should see del Rivero's pink gridded flags as a corollary; they air the nation's dirty laundry—and idea she has brought back inside in the laundry line artwork *Ragline* (2020) (fig. 21).

In addition to the possible interpretations already suggested, here the organically shaped soaked-in marks conjure up the unruly flows of menstruation. This natural cycle in many women's bodies has so often been repressed and contained by culture. I do not wish to suggest that menstruation is equivalent to womanhood and recognize such an interpretation would edge too close to a kind of essentialism that characterized the thinking of some second-wave feminists—especially feminist artists in the 1970s. However, it is precisely because del Rivero is concerned with reassessing or detouring traditional understandings of "the domestic" or "the feminine" (and confounding their conventional opposition to public and masculine), which sustains and licences a reading of drips as possibly alluding to menstrual blood. As I have already suggested, Duchamp capitalized ideas about ejaculate as indicator of artistic potency and critics regularly construed paint this way in Pollock's output. A "heretical" reading, via a historicising and feminist lens,

⁹² Amy Swerdlow, "Female culture, pacificism, and feminism: Women Strike for Peace," *Current Issues in Women's History*, eds. Arina Angerman, Geerte Binnema, Annemieke Keunen, Vefie Poels, and Jacqueline Zirkzee (New York: Routledge, 1989), 120.

requires opening up to the possibility of an alternate account of abstract dripped forms even as the legacy of Jackson Pollock haunts them.⁹³ Furthermore, just as Pollock intended with his paint, del Rivero does wish her stain here to be the “index of accidents.”⁹⁴ Despite appearing to be the result of splashed and dripped red liquid, they are applied repeatedly and quite precisely via silkscreen. While they read as actual blemishes, the deliberate spills are best viewed as *signs of stains*. Thus, the banners revise the traditional associations with impurity and repressions of such cyclical excretions; they recode the ferrous red “soilings,” making them part of a celebratory emblem of feminine potency.⁹⁵ They provoke an interrogation of the state of the nation and the signal the continued need for equitable representation in government and society’s continued ambivalence about female agency.⁹⁶ Their ultimate message is to underscore that politics is very much women’s work.

As many other people and institutions were involved in advocating for and organizing the collective endeavor of showing del Rivero’s *Letter from Home (Suffrage)*, I increasingly began to conceive of my role not so much as a curator, but as a convener. Taking lessons from del Rivero’s methods, I too felt like the singular curator-as-author model that often characterizes exhibitions did not make any sense here. In much the same way that a symposium might be convened, I view the exhibition of her flags as a kind of group conversation. In the same vein, although this text was created to specifically accompany the multiplatform initiative, *Elena del Rivero Home Address*,

⁹³ I deliberately use Alan Kaprow’s wording from Arts Magazine in order to point to the range of lessons taken from Pollock--especially about the end of art.

⁹⁴ See Chave, 102.

⁹⁵ For more on the connection between (Benjaminian) allegory and emblems see Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 67-86 .

⁹⁶ I refer to the summer 2020 debates over Democratic vice-presidential candidates and the tendency to attack or criticize women with labels that would never be used for men. See Annie Linskey and Isaac Stanley-Becker, “Biden campaign, women’s groups are working to blunt sexist attacks on his vice presidential pick,” *Washington Post*, August 9, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sexism-biden-vice-president-pick/2020/08/08/ad666a12-d5f3-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html.

which aimed to bring *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* to 19 locations. It should not be taken as definitive—for, as each host has been invited to weigh in, it is just one of a plurality of interpretations about the meanings of del Rivero’s work. Thus, I hope that this essay operates with a potentiality for lateral connections that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes: as “a space of critical openness in which you assert your ideas next to rather than in opposition of other thinkers.”⁹⁷

A collective spirit of creation extends to the full titles of the *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* banners. In a number of cases, the artist will dedicate the flag to a distinct historical figure relevant to the site where it is exhibited, who will be acknowledged in the title. As members of the communities where each flag is shown get a say in determining the names of the works, del Rivero horizontally distributes authorial authority and aims to make a specific connection to each site. This naming practice enables a further range of historical considerations in relation to the legislation of suffrage and realizes Cixous’s affirmation: “we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another.”⁹⁸

Del Rivero’s affirmation that she enters into “dialogue with difference” (and enjoins others to do so too) continues with her current artworks.⁹⁹ Hence, I conclude by embroidering “Letter from Home” with a one more web of exchanges and allusions. The words of the French-Uruguayan poet Isidore-Lucien Ducasse, typically known as the Comte de Lautremont, are perhaps instructive for understanding del Rivero’s works. Lautremont is best known for lines popularized by the surrealist manifesto, which refer to the poetic potential “the chance meeting of a sewing machine”- -a machine used for textiles and something more quotidian—“an umbrella.” Aleatory encounters

⁹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2003), quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Practicing Trio A,” *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 72.

⁹⁸ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 882.

⁹⁹ See Del Rivero, “Artist Statement for *[Swi:t] Home* and *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*,” op. cit.

with Del Rivero's monstrous dishtowels "Letter from Home: Suffrage", are similarly surreal in their suturing: domestic and public, masculine and feminine become intertwined as if on a Möbius strip. Her approach to heretically cite prior authorities and contest them conjures up Mexican poet Jose Emilio Pacheco's redeployment of lines from Comte de Lautremont in his *El Repose del Fuego* (1966). Pacheco advocated for a citational understanding of creativity, derived from Lautrment: "*Poesía no es de nadie: se hace entre todos*" ("poetry belongs to no one: is made by/between all of us").¹⁰⁰ However, del Rivero's canvases and flags are not merely citing the past to make poetry into pictures. Returning to my epigraph, the line from Walter Benjamin that I embarked this essay with, her abstract dishtowels are torches that urgently burn and illuminate. Ultimately, *Letter from Home (Suffrage)* (as well as the broader series) is a dispatch teaching too that "politics belongs to no one: it is made by all of us."

¹⁰⁰ See Francisca Noguero Jiméñez, "Leer en Pacheco" in José Emilio Pacheco, *Contraelegía*, ed. Francisca Noguero Jiméñez (Madrid: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca/ Patrimonio Nacional, 2009), 87. Appropriately, there has historically been some debate about the origins this quote by Pacheco, with some authors crediting Julián Hernández.