

Cantando Chorus Bajito Chorus Chorus

Cantando Bajito: Chorus is the final movement of three exhibitions.

Translated into English as “singing softly,” the series title is drawn from a phrase used by Dora María Téllez Argüello, a now-liberated Nicaraguan political prisoner, to describe the singing exercises she did while incarcerated in isolation. Helping her to conserve her voice and defeat the political terror she endured, Téllez’s quiet singing became a powerful strategy for survival and resistance. Conceived in three movements, *Cantando Bajito* features artists who explore similar forms of creative resistance in the wake of widespread gender-based violence. Over its arc, the series has reflected on *Testimonies*, the forms that bearing witness can take, and *Incantations*, the channels that transmit protective knowledge.

Chorus, the series’ culminating exhibition, considers the importance of collective making, organizing, and care arising from interdependence in shared struggles. The exhibition’s title evokes two elements connected to vocal performance: a choral body and the refrain of a popular song. Just as a choral body assembles disparate voices that build together, the show centers the political power generated by the act of joining voices in community and protest. Like a refrain, the part of a song that carries its main message and draws the listener to add their voice, *Chorus* is an invitation to enter into a shared performance. This performance seeks to embody what scholar Leticia Sabsay calls the “aesthetics of vulnerability.” Countering the “aesthetics of cruelty” — present in violence against feminized bodies that aims to divide and erase them — this concept recognizes the liberating potential of feminized bodies who face vulnerability *en masse*, rising above dividing lines in solidarity, reaching together toward a world where everyone can flourish.

Reflecting the strength and vulnerability intertwined in vocal expression, artworks in *Chorus* prompt consideration of how vulnerability can serve as an effective mobilizing force. Echoing Judith Butler’s reframing of it, *Chorus* foregrounds vulnerability as “part of the very meaning of political resistance.”¹ When bodies protesting together in the streets show the power of their vulnerability before state violence, we see that it is in vulnerability itself that resistance is found.

Artworks in *Chorus* echo a range of performance-based strategies used in collective struggles against gender-based violence, involving media, symbols, images, chants, gestures, and movement.

Fatma Charfi’s interconnected human-shaped figures in her paper-based work emerged as she witnessed and grieved the Gulf War’s devastations. *Mutation I* (1992) shows linked figures in wave-like formations. Blurring the line between falling and rising, the work meditates on the strength of bodies in alliance and the vulnerability that binds them. The orange-gold background conveys the hope arising from this coming together.

Similarly exploring the use of performance in collective resistance, Hoda Afshar’s photographic series *In Turn* (2023) looks at the Kurdish women’s movement’s legacy in the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran. Iranian women who, like Afshar, live outside Iran stand together, physically connected by their braided hair, in solidarity with women living within the country. The turn or fold of the hair evokes both a political turn and intertwined solidarities. The women release doves into shared skies, showing how symbolic images can weave interconnectedness across contexts. Tania Candiani’s paintings from the series *Manifestantes (Protesters)* (2022–2024) also underscore the transnational nature of feminist mobilization. The series, which emerged with the “Glitter Revolution” that followed the rape of a teenage girl by Mexico City police in 2019, recovers press photos of protesters shouting in global feminist movements, inviting us to listen in unison and join the chorus. Embroidered figures, on a large scale and in bold red, are visually amplified, their transnational voice reverberating across the world.

In addition to contemporary feminist public mobilizations, *Chorus* also looks at how other organizations, such as families, cooperatives, or collectives, can provide infrastructural support under precarity, again echoing Butler’s reconceptualization of vulnerability. For Textiles Semillas (Textiles as Seeds), a union of weavers, artists, and researchers, weaving is an exercise of mutual care and resistance in the face of epistemicide enacted toward Indigenous people in Argentina. Weavings displayed together on an iron framework in the installation *El tejido mensaje-aliento-pensamiento-resistencia (The weaving message-breath-thought-resistance)* (2024) suggest their collective upholding of Indigenous knowledge. Chloé Bass’s *Cutting Room Floor* installations (2024) include video essays, prints, and photographs relating to the project we *turn to time* (2024) that highlight the importance and limitations of family structures through intimate glimpses into the lives of mixed-race families in the U.S. The families’ self-documented footage from birthday parties, holidays, or family dinners unfolds nuances that shift narratives and create an archive the artist could not find elsewhere.

The collective memories nurtured by archives featured in *Chorus* hold layers of deep significance. Among these is the space they create for documenting and grieving the failures of systems. Archivo Memoria Trans México (Trans Memory Archive Mexico) and the affiliated project Hospital de ropa (Clothing Hospital) transform textiles belonging to trans women and gender nonconforming people who have died of AIDS in Mexico since the 1980s, to embody their memory in new pieces of clothing and textiles. Conceiving the project as a site of material and symbolic transformation, Hospital de ropa recombines these textiles into celebrations of loved ones’ lives. Archives can transform not only collected items but also narratives, undoing attempts at erasure and returning control over representation to communities. This is palpable in the photo installation created by Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina (Trans Memory Archive Argentina), which conveys a rich array of shared history and interrelational community, reflecting the archive’s aim to preserve and vindicate trans memory. Relatedly, Los Angeles Contemporary Archive’s *Private Practices: AAP! Artist and Sex Worker Collection* (2021–) constructs a healing-focused celebration of Asian American perspectives through erotic ritual. Its contents—including photographs, apparel, set pieces, legal documents, and other ephemera pertinent to sex work—show the community’s resourcefulness and solidarity in the face of systemic oppression.

Reflecting the collective spirit of the archive, the entire ensemble of curators has created a collective desk for *Chorus*, assembling readings, ephemera, and annotations on their significance, as well as works from a number of collaborative projects. In addition to the selections from the *Private Practices* collection, the installation features Lizania Cruz’s *To Feel, To Resist, and To Flourish* (2024), a collaborative creation of flower arrangements with feminist organizers, during which they discuss what is needed not just to survive and live, but to flourish. It also presents an intervention by Cyberfeminism Index, a collection of radical techno-critical activism, academic articles, hackerspaces, software education, net art, and more, and an *Exchange Journal* (2024) offered by queer artists’ platform FAQ2, inspired by the “exchange diary” used by Japanese children to share their news with each other.

Lauren Berlant’s well-known concept of “cruel optimism” — when something a person desires stands as a barrier to their own flourishing — reminds us that affects are political and politics are affective. *Chorus* also recognizes that surviving is very different from flourishing. The joy, humor, and solidarity so abundant among these artworks,

even as they document and grieve injustice, evoke interdependence as a path to liberation and pleasure. The collective Mai Ling finds in the invasive kudzu plant a muse for considering ways of reclaiming agency through shared resistance and pleasure. Their interactive installation *Becoming Stickiness* (2023/2024) invites visitors to explore the pleasures and potentials of moving beyond dichotomies of thought like those between invasive and decorative.

Cecilia Granara’s painting *Occhi, Luca, Sangue, Stelle (Eyes, Light, Blood, Stars)* (2023) brings the artworks in the exhibition together by evoking the blood that flows through all of us, connecting us. The hands, reaching out to touch the flow, try to connect the bottom of the sea to the skies. These are our hands, the hands of our ancestors, of communities. They unite in a chorus of movement. As in all of Granara’s work, it is from the vulnerability in the liminal space between the body and the spirit that resistance springs. Her sensuous figures seem in constant motion, their softness and vulnerability their strength. It is in this strength that we can find joy.

Hands, whether closed as fists, open to caress, or clapping to make sound, are a motif in the exhibition. Hands that protest and hands that care find each other in an interdependent relationship to build flourishing futures. Through them, we see that these futures can happen only through the vulnerability and intimacy of meeting each other in respect and with honor, recognizing our respective flaws, and deciding to continue holding one another.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

ROXANA FABIUS is a Uruguayan curator and art administrator based in New York City. Between 2016 and 2022 she was Executive Director at A.I.R. Gallery, the first artist-run feminist cooperative space in the U.S. During her tenure at A.I.R. she organized programs and exhibitions with artists and thinkers such as Gordon Hall, Elizabeth Povinelli, Jack Halberstam, Che Gosset, Regina José Galindo, Lex Brown, Kazako, Zarina, Mindy Seu, Naama Tzabar, and Howardena Pindell among many others. These exhibitions, programs and special commissions were made in collaboration with international institutions such as the Whitney Museum, Google Arts and Culture, The Feminist Institute, and Frieze Art Fair in New York and London. Fabius has served as an adjunct professor for the Curatorial Practices seminar at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and Tel Aviv University. She has also taught at Parsons at The New School, City University of New York, Syracuse University, and Rutgers University. She is currently curating the 2024 exhibition series *Cantando Bajito* at the Ford Foundation Gallery.

BEVA OTHMANI is an art curator and researcher from Algeria and Tunisia, dividing her time between Tunis and New York. Currently, she is the G-MAP Africa Fellow at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Her recent curatorial projects include the three-part exhibition series *Cantando Bajito* at the Ford Foundation Gallery, the Ljubljana 35th Graphic Arts Biennial, and *Publishing Practices #2* at Archive Berlin. Previously, she took part in the curatorial teams of various projects with sonsbeekzo •x24 (2020), the *Forum Expanded* of the Biennale (2019), and the Dak’Art 13 Biennial (2018), among others, and was a curatorial assistant at the Berlin-based art space SAVVY Contemporary. Some of her latest curatorial projects explored radical feminist publishing practices, post-colonial histories of print-making, and the construction of racial identities in art in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

MINDY SEU is a designer and technologist based in New York City and Los Angeles. Her expanded practice involves archival projects, techno-critical writing, performative lectures, and design commissions. Her latest writing surveys feminist economies, historical precursors of the metaverse, and the materiality of the internet. Mindy’s ongoing *Cyberfeminism Index*, which gathers three decades of online activism and net art, was commissioned by Rhizome, presented at the New Museum, and awarded the Graham Foundation Grant. She has lectured internationally at cultural institutions (Barbican Centre, New Museum), academic institutions (Columbia University, Central Saint Martins), and mainstream platforms (Pornhub, SSENSE, Google), and been a resident at MacDowell, Sinterwerk Foundation, Pioneer Works, and Internet Archive. Her design commissions and consultation include projects for the Serpentine Gallery, Canadian Centre for Architecture, and MIT Media Lab. Her work has been featured in *Frieze*, *Vanity Fair*, *Dazed*, *Gagosian Quarterly*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *I-D*, and more. She is currently an Associate Professor at University of California, Los Angeles in the Department of Design Media Arts.

SUSANA VARGAS CERVANTES teaches, writes, and curates. Vargas Cervantes is a transdisciplinary scholar, internationally recognized for her artistic and academic work at the intersections of alternative criminology, visual studies, and queer studies—in both Anglo North America and Latin America. Her research mines the connections between gender, sexuality, class, and skin tonalities to reconceptualize pigmentocracy as a system of perception. She is the author of the book *The Little Old Lady Killer: The Sensationalized Crimes of Mexico’s First Female Serial Killer* (NYU Press, 2019) and *Mujerinos* (Editorial RM, 2018). After a Fulbright Visiting Fellowship at Columbia University, she joined Carleton University as an Assistant Professor in Communication and Media Studies.

ABOUT THE FORD FOUNDATION GALLERY

Opened in March 2019 at the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice in New York City, the Ford Foundation Gallery spotlights artwork that wrestles with difficult questions, calls out injustice, and points the way toward a fair and just future. The gallery functions as a responsive and adaptive space and one that serves the public in its openness to experimentation, contemplation, and conversation. Located near the United Nations, it draws visitors from around the world, addresses questions that cross borders, and speaks to the universal struggle for human dignity.

The gallery is free and open to the public Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m.–6 p.m. It is accessible to the public through the Ford Foundation building entrance on 43rd Street, east of Second Avenue.

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320 East 43rd Street
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¹ Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 21.