

## Vis. [Un]Necessary force A Socially Engaged Creative Practice Research Project. Dr. Luz María Sánchez Cardona

Affiliation: Artistic Member of the Art System of Art Creators [SNCA], Department of Arts and Humanities  
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Lerma.  
Mexico City, Mexico

luz@luzmariasanchez.com, l.sanchez@correo.ler.uam.mx

### Abstract

Vis is a long term socially engaged creative practice research project that—using digital technology as a tool—examines the consequences of violence on the daily life of civilians in contemporary Mexico. This project addresses the tensions that take place in the smallest human unit/group possible: family. Specifically, *Vis* focuses on families in both rural and urban areas of Mexico, that have one or more members that, officially, are not kidnapped or killed, but who are not present: absentes [ausentes], that is those taken away by police forces, the military, or by members of drug-cartels. At present the ausentes, their children and/or spouses [not officially orphans or widows yet], are just numbers and statistics in governmental reports. This project reclaims the experiences of these families by attentive listening to them, understanding their stories, and engaging in an active participation about how they would like to be portrayed within the contemporary social ethos. Using the potential of technology through creative practice, *Vis* collaborates with these families in order to regain the lost power of their voice—a voice that has been silenced—within a dialogue that has yet to start in Mexico.

### Keywords

Social Justice, Art, Creative Practice Research, Community, Digital Technology, Digital Image, 3D portrait, Sound, Voice.

### War and Violence in Mexico

How to explore contemporary violence in a country where the figure of the state has been completely absent or, in the best case scenario, breaking apart? It is a challenge to try to grasp such a complex theme: There is no official data one could relate to there is continuous intimidation of media and journalists; there is lack of trust in the state representatives—from mayors and judges, to street police. Could it be that the state itself—from its edges to its center—is suffering from a process of permanent de-composition, which makes it impossible to navigate reality armed with the lingua of 21st century democracies.

Words like ‘reconstruction’ or ‘peace’ do not have a place in the Mexican chorus, given the fact that we are

far from being in a stage of reconstruction. Scholars, social activists and individuals do not yet have a consensus on what the word ‘peace’ may mean. Are we talking of ‘peace’ as the opposite of ‘war’? War against whom? Why? And who is fighting it?

In Mexico, government and cartels alike avoid calling things by any name. Silence is the rule they would like to impose, at any price: “Different forms of forced silence, of quietening” (Ochoa Gautier, 2003).

The Government has not declared a state of emergency, and actions of Cartels are counted as petty crimes. The Mexican legal system is way behind on what is taking place, and corruption—if not collusion—of police and special law enforcement groups is now at the highest levels of government.



Figure 1 Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus* (2009-2016)

Each community is forced to make its own code to refer to what is happening. The simple act of sharing an experience, by the way of trust—if the wrong listener is on the other side—may bring direct physical violence to the person voicing reality. Entire communities are living in a state of despair, fragility, and even terror.

During the past five decades we have witnessed drug cartels infiltrating every layer of life. But the last ten years [2006-2016] have been the most violent ones. The whole strategy of former President Calderón—even before he took office—was to knock down violence associated with drug trafficking in Mexico and, actually, just a few days after taking his oath of office he declared a war against drug trafficking that endured from 11th December 2006—when Calderón actually started this war by sending 5,000 soldiers and police officers to the state of Michoacán (Agren, 2015)—until the last day he was in Office: 30th November 2012. During the six years that this war took place, former President Calderón appeared in military garments as Mexico's Drug War Commander in Chief.



Figure 2. Luz María Sánchez. Detritus. (2009-2016)

The main target of this military strategy was to reclaim control of those states where Mexican cartels were in charge. Mexico's Drug War (Archibold, 2012) began as a decision to recover sovereignty in a context of political and social crisis (Pereyra, 2012). At the end of this period, there were more than 45,000 officers deployed in the states of Mexico, Baja California, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Sinaloa and Durango (Aguayo, 2008: 174), and more than 60,000 casualties.

The strategy of having military and special forces units deployed all around the country continued under Peña Nieto's Presidency, if not under the tag of Drug

War, but as a way of trying to regain control over certain regions of the country—plazas as they are being called under this parallel code used by the police, the military, the government and the cartels, and that civilians are learning on the go.

This war, however, seems to be against civilians, and every broken boundary makes the problem harder and harder to resolve. Entire communities in the north of Mexico have been abandoning their belongings and their jobs, in extremely fast exodus, in order to save their lives and those of their loved ones. When the story of the 43 missing students surfaced, the independent search for their remains—in the case that there actually are any—resulted in the discovery of several mass graves in which the bodies did not match those of the 43 (Miroff, 2014).

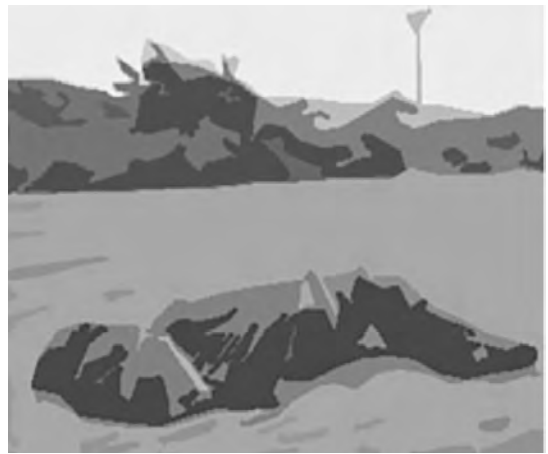


Figure 3. Luz María Sánchez. Detritus. (2009-2016)

During these ten years we have witnessed how individuals and entire communities—beaten by violence—are being criminalized by media and the government. The voice of victims of this violence is being completely suppressed, their accounts are under scrutiny, and their lives under siege.

### **Ausentes**

Hundreds of parents are currently looking for their sons and daughters—taken by the police, the military or the cartels—fearing that in the best case scenario they are working either at the drug farms—or ranchos—as slaves, or as prostitutes for the drug capos, or in cartel-controlled brothels. In the worst case scenario, these kidnapped individuals might be resting in the thousands of mass

graves dispersed around the country (Lakhani, 2015).

The term *ausentes*—absentees or missing—was coined by the families of these individuals that do not have any information on their loved ones, there is no trace of them, but there is no ransom asked for—technically is not an abduction—their bodies do not materialize—without a body there is no technical confirmation of a death—but the fact is that they are not present. Families then reject any other term until they do have confirmation of their loved one’s fate.

Since the State is not implementing real social strategies to help these families and their communities, and given the condition of extreme despair that these individuals are in, they started different ways of collaborating in order to get organized and start the search for their loved ones.

This search, through local or national brigadas [brigades], is a community act in which individuals join groups to independently track and find mass graves—some of these are clandestine burials managed by legal authorities (Janowitz, 2016)—where they dig—with or without the help of local or federal authorities—and then exhume the remains found. That is the reason why they call themselves *rastreadores* [trackers], or *rastreadoras*—like the group of the same name of more than two hundred women based in Los Mochis, in the northern state of Sinaloa (Padilla, 2016) that are tracking the whole state in the search for missing citizens.



Figure 4. Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus*. (2009-2016)

Through *Vis* we are looking closely at this social phenomenon, and even if the final creative project will find the shape of sculptural sound installations, the creative research process using technology at each stage will help us answer the question: What is the role of art in defining the use of technology to support—if not

peace and conflict resolution—social reconstruction?

Families are units: the smallest human group possible. And using a metaphor: when an element of this unit is extricated for no apparent reason, it takes time until the unit realizes that this element is not coming back, and therefore that it has no possibilities to repair itself. Reasons are diverse, but all of them deal with the collapse of the structure of the state.

The unit turns, then, to its own community. But the community is unable to help because the exacerbated violence is implemented by organized groups—legitimate and illegitimate. Since these groups have the power to take over the whole community, silence builds up as a barrier: nobody knows anything. What happens then is that the unit collapses—economically and emotionally—: Families break apart, some of them emigrate to safer places, few of them start the search for the missing one, the *ausente*.

For those that are broken, frightened, and threatened, silence and acceptance seem the only options to keep going—a sort of survival mode. In the exceptional occasions when members of the unit start a search for the *ausente*, they also start wandering in circles through state offices, morgues, brothels, any place where they get a hint of information on the whereabouts of their loved ones.

*Vis* core group is made of these individuals that are already in the process of voicing themselves loudly. The chorus begins with them. *Vis* focuses specifically on two groups: the orphan children and the surrounding family of the *ausentes*. Children and adults that are willing to share their experiences in living with violence—violence that is not just implicit but explicit, symbolic violence, psychological violence, extreme physical violence.

This approach to the described problem requires the construction of trust, the building of connection, common of ground. And since some of these families are under threat, we have to be very sensitive about the information we move around the project—we barely can imagine a scenario where there is no confidence in authorities, neighbors, even other family members—that is why this project has to operate on the basis of ‘trust’.

### Interdisciplinarity

Working with such a multifaceted theme requires collaboration and advice from professionals that work in different fields. *Vis* is surrounded by a group of advisors that includes psychologists, social justice specialists, and legal experts that provide counseling on a case by

case basis.

This interdisciplinary group of professionals facilitates the direct contact with specific families and individuals, and enables part of the creation process by providing me with information on previous experiences within the field as reference.



Figure 5. Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus*. (2009-2016)

A parallel—but not less important—group of advisors is made of programmers, engineers, and designers. Programmers assist me on the operation of the Vis online repository. Engineers and designers help on the 3D modeling, scanning and printing, and in the actual operation of the electronic sound devices that will be part of the two sound installations that will be constructed at the end of 2017 and mid 2018.

### Repository

Vis—as the projects 2487 and diaspora produced previously—has a strong research component. The Vis archive is being assembled at the same time as the creative research is taking place: interviews, research, graphics or maps all are part of the process and are being stored directly into the Vis repository. Therefore, the repository is the archive.

The repository is open for contributors, colleagues, and advisors who are able to access the research. Once all the installations are completed, the repository will be locked, and no more data will be added. But the general public will be able to access it as it will stay open as the complementary documentation of this socially engaged, creative research project.

On the public part of this repository [front], we are creating a dynamic portfolio to introduce the project online. But on the back of this repository, we are building an intuitive work experience in real-time. This

tool enables Vis team members in different parts of the Americas and Europe to add information and share it in real time.

### Social Engagement

Through dialogue and conversation, relatives of ausentes—parents and children—get involved in a dynamic that eventually will help them regain the lost power of their voice and use the voice to talk about their private, inner emotional situation and also discuss the violence they have to endure. “There are two kinds of narrations that should be interlaced to try to give violence a proper place: the private narration that will allow mourning, and the narration of those responsible for the public voice. The condition for getting out of the catastrophe lies in the possibility of intertwining both narratives” (Ochoa Gautier, 2003).

By attentive listening to these individuals, understanding their stories, and engaging them active participation about how they would like to be portrayed within the contemporary social ethos, we are taking a humanistic approach, far away from media—for which these individuals are ‘news’—far away from media and government offices—for which they are data. Vis implies a process of rehumanizing these individuals, taking them out of their positions as mere data and making them real to others.



Figure 6. Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus*. (2009-2016)

Now that we are already three years—and counting—into the creative research of Vis, and have had several conversations with human rights activists and civilians, we have found that there is a need for more information about creative practices and technology as social catalysts. Consequently, conferences and talks on the theme of art and violence were designed, as well as workshops in which participants—children—could voice their current situation, where they could have

the “possibility of gathering together around a creative activity outside of the practices of violence cultivated by the local gangs” (Ochoa Gautier, 2003).



Figure 7. Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus*. (2009-2016).

I see *Vis* as a nod that listens forward, taking those that surround the 24,000—and counting—missing-individuals, outside of the lists of secondary casualties of violence in Contemporary Mexico.

### Human Scale

Working with digital technologies [online-repository, 3D images, geo-localization, digital video/audio/photo] but operating on a human scale [one-on-one dialogue, building trust, attentive listening], I am looking forward to finding equilibrium when the reconstruction of these histories take place, both on the net and in the three-dimensional space.

Technology facilitates the final shape of the creative process. The online repository works as a reference tool while the project is developing: it allows team members to build up batches of information gathered during research, visualize them, and understand the numbers and their social implications.

Even if *Vis* is using digital tools to build and communicate, it is important to state that it is being made on a human scale. Building research within the repository is a hand-craft. Analyzing data, organizing data, even if using digital tools to visualize it, has to be done on a one-to-one basis. That is what the project is calling for.

Working hand in hand with social psychologists, social workers, educators, and human-rights advocates, we are approaching these families and providing 3D models of drawings by children in art therapy. These 3D figures modeled after the children’s drawings will give

shape to the 3D printings that will have integrated audio-reproduction systems and that will be integrated as part of the sound installation *V.[u]nf\_2*.

*Vis* explores the possibilities offered by 3D scanning and printing with the aim of developing functional sound devices that depart from commercial design and enable me to adapt sculptural elements to the requirements of the sound installations.

### Construction of Aesthetic Objects

As the last stage of this creative research project, there is a commitment to create several sculptural, large-scale, sound installations that closes this investigation on violence as voiced by civilians.

The first sound installation of the three that conforms this *Vis* is already completed: *V.(u)nf\_1*—an acronym that stands for *Vis*. [un]necessary force edition 01.

The second iteration will consist on the 3D sculptural sound objects based on the drawings of children, and the third will consist of custom made sound devices in the shape of fragments of human heads, bodies—molded after living family members of ausentes.

### Interaction

For the participants it is important to be heard, listened to. Their histories—sometimes hidden as something illegal, since family members of victims deal with a double victimization—are important to be heard, to be known by the general public, inside and outside of their communities.

The more visibility they get, the safer they feel, the more empathy that can be constructed around their situation— our situation.





Figure 8. Luz María Sánchez. 2015. V[u]nf\_1. 74 sound clips in mp3 format each playing through 74 sound devices shaped in the form of a Carcal F Pistol. Installation detail. ©Cecilia Hurtado



Figure 9. Luz María Sánchez. *detritus*. (2009-2016)

For the public that eventually will interact with the final work, it is important to know the histories of those

who live in a state of emergency due to the exacerbated violence exercised by distinct groups of power—legitimate and illegitimate—in contemporary Mexico.

### Last

Technology is indeed a potential tool to support social process pointed at resolution of conflicts. In the Colombian case, individuals were called to build “new coexistence and ethical practices that counteract the violent death empire, to call for a new civility order, and to transform the heritage of revenge through the construction of mourning.” (Ochoa Gautier, 2004: 23).

In Mexico, where we are still unable to use the word war or the word peace without asking first where are we standing and how we got here, we are embarked in a creative research project that uses technology to register and circulate the fragmented stories of the victims of this war against civilians.

Vis is looking forward to present, through digital means—the archive, the repository, the data, the creative work— one of the possible answers that may help build a new chorus, a chorus that will allow everybody to be heard.



Figure 10. Luz María Sánchez. *Detritus*

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### Author Biography

Transdisciplinary art practitioner, scholar, media archaeologist and author, Luz María Sánchez (Mexico) studied music and literature, and through her doctoral studies (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona) she focused on the role of sound in artistic practices since its mechanical inception in the 19th century.

Sánchez is Artistic Member of the National System of Art Creators in Mexico, and is part of the Program "Science, Art and Complexity" of the Complexity Sciences Center at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México C3-UNAM. She is the Chair of the Department of Arts and Humanities at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Lerma.

*Samuel Beckett electrónico: Samuel Beckett coclear* (Mexico City: UAM) and *The Technological Epiphanies of Samuel Beckett: Machines of Inscription and Audiovisual Manipulation* (Mexico City: FONCA) are her most recent publications -both 2016-.

Her artwork has been included in major sound and/or music festivals as well as museums and galleries in the Americas and Europe: Zéppellin Sound Art Festival (Spain), Bourges International Festival of Electronic Music and Sonic Art (France), and Festival Internacional de Arte Sonoro (Mexico); Museum of Contemporary Art (Bogotá), Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (Mexico City), The Dallas Contemporary (Dallas), The Illinois State Museum (Chicago and Springfield) and Centro de Cultura Contemporanea de Barcelona (CCCB) among others.