

The Age of Love: Chapter II Quack! A Duck's Heart by Chus Martínez

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By Chus Martínez

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Alexa Karolinski and Ingo Niermann, *Oceano de amor*, 2020. Video stills. Courtesy of the artists.

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Over the last few months I've had several important encounters with swans, geese, and ducks. We humans, now outside our usual routes and routines, have ventured into territories that belong to animals. We've done this without asking for permission or establishing any form of protocol, assuming that "the whole world is oregano." This Spanish expression is used when someone takes things for granted too easily — like walking paths and settling into spaces where animals have been quite undisturbed until now. Far from being angry, the swans, geese, and ducks have been more understanding than ever, and have even kept me company when, at the shore of a river or lake, I've tried to forget the pains of Zoom. Oh! Their watery eyes are so different from the unpleasant smallness of the cameras. They are so warm and so interested in the very act of watching and observing. I actually told them about my frustration with the technology's design: Wouldn't it be better if those cameras were also looking at us from the side? Like the eyes

of these beautiful animals? It seems more discreet and empathic than this imposed frontality. And couldn't those cameras be a little bit bigger and even elliptical? Those small round shapes, exactly in the middle of the screen, have such an ungenerous air about them, not to mention the ugliness of the poor external cameras used for improved broadcast quality. Those birds' eyes, on the contrary, were all-understanding, their necks all-relatable. Their bodies kept moving around and about me, rhythmically, as if my words had a choreographic effect. And, while I talked to these birds — because you must talk to them once you are in their home — they seem to reply with a line from Shakespeare: “O! never say that I was false of heart”! This is the point: I surrendered to these birds because they are true of heart.

Both my parents have no formal education. As kids they could not attend school regularly because they needed to assist their families. At times, for a year or sometimes two, the teachers were not even sent to those remote territories. For this reason, I assume cartoons and comics were of immense help to them — a source of information and joy. Several characters from both televised cartoons and comic books — Pepé Le Pew, the French striped skunk, Tom and Jerry, Donald Duck — were to our household what Beethoven was to the dog in the trademarked *His Masters Voice* (1898) painting by Francis Barraud. My mother, new to the big city, referred to the men who addressed her in public transportation as the “stripped skunks of the metro.” My father — the rural Jerry that made it into a Tom's world — explained every single monetary conflict, matters of interest or capital, in terms of Scrooge McDuck's behavior. What in other houses may have been discussions about Pierre Bourdieu's sociological analysis, in my house took the form of situational examples performed by Donald Duck's nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Even if we are all aware of the limits and dangers of anthropomorphism, it is also true that for my parents — who grew up in complete coexistence with animals — the references were deployed without any irony and were taken as solid sources. And they were — even more so because repeatedly reading and enjoying those same books and cartoons was probably one of the most reassuring experiences of my education. Tears of empathic helplessness would come to the eyes of my mother when seeing that skunk seek an unwanted kiss from a female counterpart. To my father, Scrooge McDuck's mountains of gold coins represented “greediness for the sole purpose of greediness.”



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And so, when I first heard from Ingo Niermann (who happens to be my love) and Alexa Karolinski, a filmmaker and friend, about the idea of filming the sequel to *Army of Love* (2016), a film presented at the ninth Berlin Biennial, curated by DIS magazine collective — I thought it was absolutely to Scrooge McDuck’s point! Cuba is a context very difficult to define and — at least on paper — remains the last communist country. But the country is first and foremost “the” island. An island with a radical awareness of its insularity — its poetry, philosophy, politics, traditions, language. The island is a whole, as if no other form of territory is possible; the ocean inhabits its heart as if nothing else existed on earth. And, for this reason, the film could not bear any title other than *Oceano de amor* (Ocean of Love, 2019). The idea of the film was simple and beautiful: to ask Cubans about love. No, not only about love, but about time and the task of living when labor is replaced by robots. Robots? Si! Robots! We all know about artificial intelligence and robots, and, true enough, Cuba is not seeing much automation in the present day, but robots are like spirits: you may not have seen any, and yet you are completely aware of their powers and traits. To ask Cubans about love is a big request. So, the task was to generate, with the help of very good friends (Cucu Diamantes, Dolores Mitchell, Malú Tarrau Broche), an open call. The open call, printed on simple A4 paper, explained what the *Army of Love* was. It was addressed to different communities, intersectional, diverse in their backgrounds and sexual identities and professions, all inhabitants of different neighborhoods of La Habana,

the capital. Translated from Spanish, the text read as follows: “The Army of Love is a solidarity that offers training, recruitment, discussion, manuals, and testimonial videos to promote the redistribution of sensual love to all who need it. Since its founding in 2016, the Army of Love has recruited and trained people of diverse age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance all over Europe.” This message was followed by practical information: if interested, please come to the back patio of a certain house situated in downtown Havana on July 1. Many came. And it was a challenge, the whole team said, during the nights following the applicant meetings, to make a selection. Ten people were interviewed and portrayed, and ten additional people were invited to the shooting of the film, at the ocean several weeks later. *Oceano de amor* presents the voices and environments of those ten people through choreographic exercises of love and loving the ocean. For the ninety-minute duration of this very powerful film, their testimonies are accompanied by the singing voice of artist Hannah Weinberger. I am not moved by an impulse to idealize when I say that these amazing people narrate their difficult circumstances, their views on life, and their hopes for love, in an unaffected, wholehearted voice. They all concur: yes, they have time to love. Suffering and pain is very present. They feel rejection due to the inability of others to accept their choices, their identity, their poverty, their extreme illnesses and unrealized dreams. And yet, they all name a space in their minds, a form of touch in their skins, a feeling in their hearts. A feeling appears in front of our eyes as they speak as a *kami* (a Japanese Shinto force that expresses the impossibility of separating the material world from the invisible one). There is so sense of the Western project of romantic love. Love here is more of an energy — not necessarily one that actualizes the fulfillment of particular needs, but one that bonds us together, keeps us relating. Even imagined, this love they speak of has an effect. It exercises the organs — *avant* in its realization — of recollection, of connection, of caring for and loving others in and with the world. While there with them, falling for love, we realize that another act is yet to happen: their encounter with the ocean. Living by the ocean means realizing how it has been taken away from you. Empires performed their expansion within an oceanic imagination that separated the original inhabitants from all they had — from that island, and from those waters. The colonial enterprise did not merely take the lives of people, their land, the resources; it also took the ocean. Most people on the island cannot swim. The experience of the sea has been taken from them. Imagine the experience of seeing, smelling, feeling the ocean every day of your life but not being able to fully live in the sea. In the last long and beautiful scene of the film we see them arriving at the beach. As if they had already known each other forever, they start performing simple and effective movements. Floating, communicating through each other’s hands. Slow dancing in entanglement, feeling the water, feeling the sun. We do not hear their voices now, only their bodies moving, transforming, opening up to the water.



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Their joy was my joy. This last long scene awakened in me a sentiment of total relation and possibility. It is soft and delicate but also profoundly real. Like those cartoon ducks and skunks were real for my parents, and then, today, like the real swans, geese, and ducks I relate to and care for so much. Yes, at the end of the movie, I totally felt like screaming, “Quack!!” Loud! So loud that the dolphins could hear me. So, so loud that the ocean could forever return to the people of the island.

Note: This is the second part of a series of articles where I am intended to morph our minds to match our senses. Bear with my way of exploring story telling as a methodology to approach art and artists. I am falling for these days probably because I miss talking to you, and this is my way of coming closer. The next chapter will be revolving on the work of Taloi Havini, whose work is currently installed – and hopefully soon at view – at the Ocean Space in Venice.