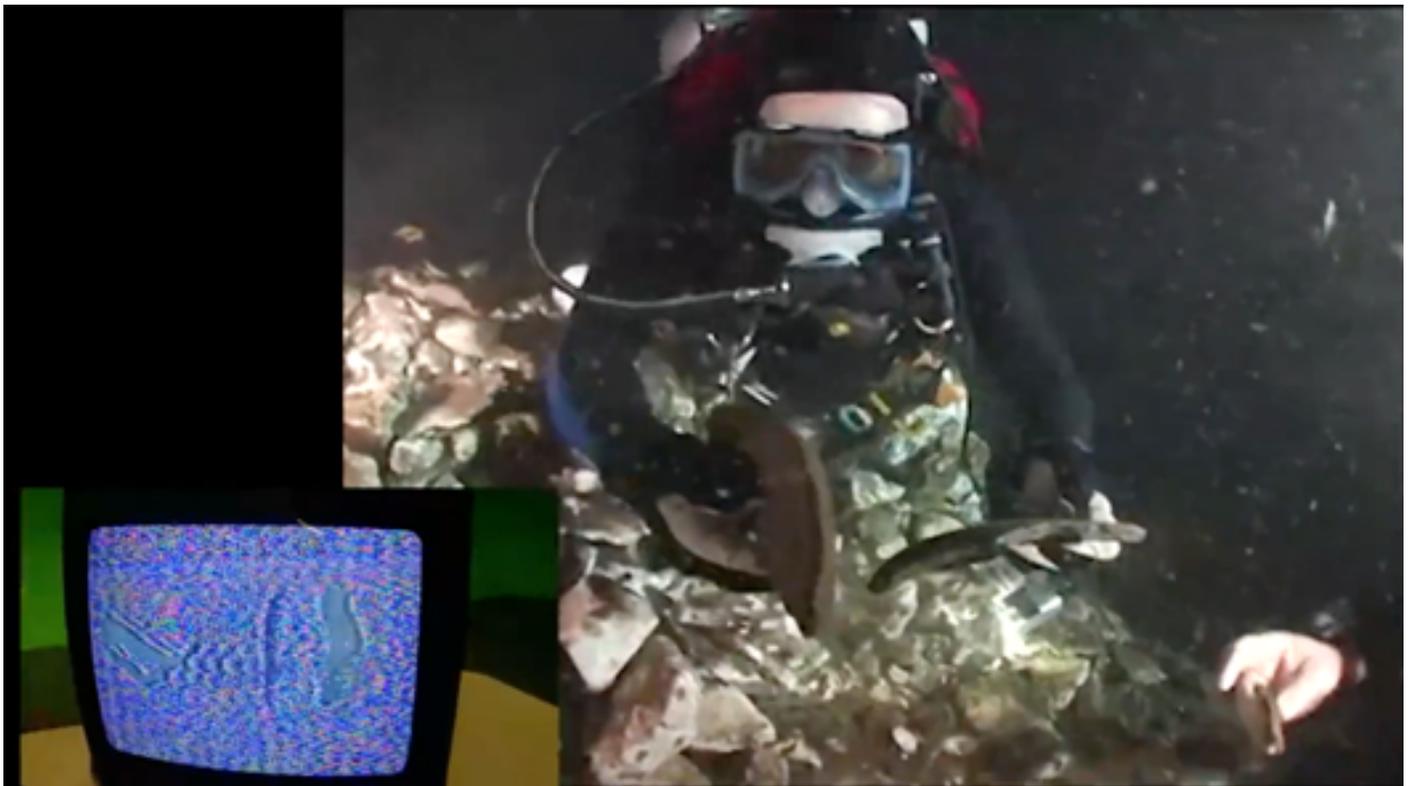


everyday beats and hierophants
by Laurel V. McLaughlin

on manuel arturo abreu's
for hierophants (2019)

May 1 – May 31, 2021



manuel arturo abreu, *for hierophants*, 2019 (still), Digital video, 8:16 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

Image description: A diver explores an underwater cave using a flashlight to illuminate and investigate a gourd-shaped artifact. This image is slightly covered on the lower left by footage of a cathode ray television depicting a static video glitch.

BIG WINDOW

Leaves, shriveled and previously disregarded, twitch under a light breeze in the beginning of manuel arturo abreu's *for hierophants* (2019), newly considered through the lens of a Google Nexus 5, as if shaken from singular and static epistemological grounds. Are these leaves for *hierophants*—the Grecian priests, or “displayer[s] of holy things,” who chanted sacred symbols during ceremonies of mysteries within the Eleusinian cult? Or maybe they are for the hierophant of the papal Tarot card, indicating a guide of conventional wisdom?¹

Rather than answering these questions, tripartite digital windows plunge us into the mystery of the screen. Metallic metronomic pulses syncopate across the virtual air, offset from the video's pacing. Layered atop one another, windows frame and re-frame viewers within sites—of an underwater Dominican cave; a 2019 drive through San José de Ocoa, Guayubín, and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; and a Pentecostal meme stating: *pinta tu cielo de esperanzas con el pincel de la fe* [paint your sky of hopes with the brush of faith]. Fading in and out, the scenes shift and slip, uneasily adjacent and overtop one another amidst zooms and eclipses. A frame playing footage from an underwater discovery of artifacts and Abreu family videos of a child drinking Gatorade circa 1998 in Oval Park (the Bronx) are configured side by side. Next to them, video of a candle stuck atop a can of Foco Soursop Juice (Jugo De Guanabana) rests below another view of wandering footage from a backyard in San José de Ocoa with the voice of abreu's mother softly recalling *recuerdos* [memories] of a blue house as synthesized undulations swell. The enigmatic images, much like the aural rhythms and shaky bodily navigation of the camera, flow non-linearly, inventing temporalities all their own within the curious musical structure of the *bulerías compás*, a Flamenco rhythm that has long intrigued the artist.² The affective relationship among the times of the associated videos join other conceptions of duration shaped by personal memory and projections of the future in abreu's *for hierophants*, destabilizing the dialectic between what abreu terms “magical thinking,” or “thinking without reason,” and ritual, or “ceremony within a system of belief.”³ The stretching of this duality ordains neither resolution nor explanation. Instead, the video offers up this everyday tension for contemplation, leading us away from spiritual expectations.

1 See Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, “Hierophant,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 3, 2021: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion>.

2 I am grateful to manuel for their generosity in speaking with me about this work and their larger practice. Laurel V. McLaughlin and manuel arturo abreu, Conversation with the artist over Zoom, January 31, 2021. The full recording of the conversation is available on abreu's Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=18759632>.

3 Ibid.

abreu's *for hierophants* orients itself around esoteric "movements," much like musical parts, but without codified tempi. They flow into one another, and even emerge and dissipate throughout. Each finds form in salvaged footage and images from the artist's defunct laptop that they collated into a work perhaps never meant to be, but that nevertheless debuted in the exhibition *Not Total* at Paragon Arts Center of Portland Community College, Oregon in 2019.⁴ The durational sections retain a sense of this subjunctive tenor, expanding and contracting in *for hierophants*, defying linear time. The *bulerías compás* operates as a type of container that demands rather than represses collaborative improvisation among "players"—here, abreu's collaged materials. abreu transposes this demand in video, guided by their abiding research of non-Eurocentric histories of abstraction, writers such as Sylvia Wynter and Wilson Harris, their own poetic practice, theorization of memes, and study of linguistics, all of which integrate themselves within the affective, personally memorial, and futural timescales in *for hierophants*.⁵

I. Downbeats, *remate*, and affect

The history of Flamenco emerged with the *Gitanos*, or Iberian Roma people, who developed its musical and dance forms in their ancestral migration from Rajasthan to Iberia, as abreu shares from their research.⁶ Colonial conquests complicate this meandering history with cultural constructs that attempted to subjugate what performer and dance historian K. Meira Goldberg understands as its "bulla" gesture.⁷ This term denotes a proclivity towards what colonizers recognized as "danced deviance," but what contemporary Black performance theory identifies as resistance and

4 See *Not Total* [manuel arturo abreu, Jonathan González, Rindon Johnson], Paragon Arts Gallery, Portland Community College Website, Accessed 8 February, 2021: <https://www.pcc.edu/galleries/2019/11/03/not-total-by-rindon-johnson-jonathan-gonzalez-and-manuel-arturo-abreu/>. See also McLaughlin, "Not Total: Jonathan González, manuel arturo abreu, and Rindon Johnson," *60InchCenter*, December 23, 2019: <https://www.60inchcenter.com/home/notttotal>.

5 For more on abreu's research on abstraction, see their lecture "An Alternative History of Abstraction," *Discrit*, May 16, 2020: <https://discrit.net/programs/an-alternative-history-of-abstraction>; and Camila McHugh, "Alt History of Abstraction 101: manuel arturo abreu," *Mousse 73 TIDBITS*, Accessed 16 February 2021: <http://moussmagazine.it/manuel-arturo-abreu-camila-mchugh-2020/>. For more on their research on memes and linguistics see manuel arturo abreu, "Still I shitpost: Cory in the Abyss on a communism of the visual + antiblackness in the meme-o-sphere with manuel arturo abreu," *AQNB*, 12 December 2017: <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/12/12/still-i-shitpost-cory-in-the-abyss-on-a-communism-of-the-visual-antiblackness-in-the-meme-o-sphere-with-manuel-arturo-abreu/>, and manuel arturo abreu, "Online Imagined Black English," *Arachne*, Accessed 3 February 2021: <https://arachne.cc/issues/01/online-imagined-manuel-arturo-abreu.html>. And for more on their poetry, see manuel arturo abreu, *list of consonants*, (Joshua Tree, CA: Bottle Cap Press, 2015); *transtrender* (Brooklyn: Quimerica Books / Ugly Duckling Presse, 2016), *Incalcuable Loss* (Portland, OR: INCA Institute, 2018).

6 I am grateful for manuel's feedback on this analysis, which comes directly from their research. Flamenco has numerous different styles, of which *bulerías* is but one.

7 K. Meira Goldberg, *Sonidos Negros: On the Blackness of Flamenco* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

dissent.⁸ As such, abreu recognizes the Western musical form of the *bulerías compás* as a “strange analysis,” as it “is a compromise between Western ears and the ears of the *Gitanos*.”⁹ Western analysts tend to “hear” the *bulerías compás* in twelve beats, like a clock, with one measure of 6/8 and one measure of 3/4 time with a downbeat. In this way, the “twelve” precedes the “one”: TWELVE one two THREE four five SIX seven EIGHT nine TEN eleven.... abreu notes that the *Gitanos* did not count the *compás* in twelve, and would have understood the semblance of a downbeat as *remate*, or a seeming conclusion of a section that actually indicates the next.¹⁰

I recall these complex historical and musical negotiations, with abreu’s generous guidance, as a means to elucidate the affect of the first section—one characterized by what my ear understands as a downbeat, or anticipated as *remate*. It appears to end, and yet sets off the following part of the overall phrase. Likewise, among the tripartite screens, we search for structured harmony or ritual, but the expectation of perfectly repeated timing misaligns magically, purposefully disarticulating the screens from one another. The home footage holds its own next to the found footage of underwater discovery and eventually against the candle atop a can. Neither the childhood quench of a Gatorade in a park nor the quiet votive candle are subsumed in formal or ideological hierarchies beneath the aqueous archaeological exploration—as one might expect. Such presumptions are not reversed either. Instead, the frames overlap tautly, infusing compounded and ordinary refreshment, skeptical wonder, and expectation into this arcane beginning. This affective adjacency, analogized by the forethought of *remate*, or a downbeat, is never lost, but continues to both propose and upend structures to come.

II. Liling, hemiolas, and personal memory

In the second movement, abreu pivots our perspective from the blue house shown in three-part multiplicity to that of a singular point of view. Turning from the *remate*—that which seems to conclude a musical phrase and simultaneously carries on—we remain on a temporal journey, shifting slightly to lilt, or known in Western musical notation as hemiolas: three beats evenly separated in the time of two.

8 Ibid.

9 Per the artist’s ongoing research.

10 Ibid.

Architectural references orient and re-orient us from the blue house of abreu's grandfather in San José de Ocoa to a home in Portland, Oregon that the artist shared with a now forgotten roommate, and finally into a clandestine exhibition. The overall scene creates a loop, a return, a digital migration through abreu's memories of site, place, and home. The on-the-fly filming renders it ordinary and yet "magical," reveling in the filmed fragments instead of its wholeness and refusing an appeal to ritualistic nostalgia. abreu nonchalantly invites us into their former home and a nondescript, seemingly empty room. The camera pans up and down slowly and methodically, then from side to side, like the emphases in a hemiola. The persisting *bulerías compás* ticks atop the synths resembling dampened electronic organ swells and scales of crackling arpeggios. Each pan of the camera captures delicately-sculpted detritus left by the roommate and "exhibited" in this secret show titled, *recipes* (2015).¹¹ But, the camera does not document as much as it registers a visual resonance among materials, almost like improvisations within the actual rhythm. Assonant white wooden curves against the tan floor; the hard stop of a concrete block next to the closet door pane; fricative wire-bound dried bamboo displayed vertically from ceiling to floor; the sonority of a perforated plastic circle over window glass; and the dissipating linger of sibilants in charcoal strewn diagonally across the floor: an air freshener, charred wood, coal, dust, plastic bits. Each has a familiar vibration not sounded, like a beat slightly off and yet acutely and affectively intoned. What at first resembles abreu's documentation for previous surreptitious exhibitions that they've realized, here figures differently, as a scenario slipping into other sites and times, like the dragging lilt of the *bulerías compás*.¹² The personal places disclose abreu's looping memories that travel and return, and simultaneously, in their fragmented forms, remind us of our own.

III. push pushy push

In the final moment of abreu's footage of their former house and covert exhibition, abreu's fingers slide across the camera lens. With this touch of digits, we revert back into a digital para-space, and the temporal pace veers from the lilting drag to a buoyant push forward. It's not unlike the conversion in the *bulerías compás*'s final sequence of 3/4, or what broadly sounds like an un-emphasized beat followed by an emphasized one. In the first window, abreu begins to "swype," sliding their fingers across

¹¹ See "recipes," manuel arturo abreu Website, Accessed 18 February 2021: <https://garageresidency.tumblr.com/recipes>.

¹² See manuel arturo abreu, *roland's room*, 2011, manuel arturo abreu Website, Accessed 8 February 2021: <https://garageresidency.tumblr.com/rolands-room>.

a smartphone keyboard, but only the blue digital and indexical residue is visible on screen. We see no fingers. abreu's asemic writing—a wordless writing with no specific semantic aim—guides this chance-based movement of digits. This process, which uses gesture and observation to see what lexical material the Swype algorithm generates, is one of “transcoding,” or, a way, as abreu theorizes, to utilize machines such as phones as a type of faith or chance-based system.¹³ In temporal terms, it is an alternation, a call and response, a push followed by another push into the future.

With swypes, abreu configures sigils—symbols imbued with magical powers—creating aleatoric poetry, or poetry created by chance, below a pre-fabulated phone title “Note @ Portland, Oregon.” While purportedly in Portland, the sigil configurations across the swyping keyboard result in poetry inscriptions untethered to place or codified language as the first lines read: “Divisibility blurbs/ Doubting ugh together.” The pittering of typing and swyping melds and replaces the beat of the *bulerías compás*, exchanging rhythms, improvising anew. The sounds meld with the ambient noise of surrounding scenes, once again in tripartite organization. Adjacent to the window of swyping, another scene with footage of a landscape shot by a friend in San José de Ocoa appears. In the background, the final view of a Pentecostal meme emerges—*la Fe tiene la capacidad de mover la mano de Dios cuando la tuya no tiene fuerzas* [faith has the ability to move God's hand when yours has no strength]—and dissolves. “God's” and/or abreu's hand is hidden from view in the footage and meme, but present in the blue mark-making. It would seem that this faith composed of swyped sigils, instead of pointing towards a transcendent futurism, occurs within a future now.

In the middle of this swype-meme musing, “mami” calls abruptly. Swyping, sigils, and poetry cease. Is this a moment of “reality” breaking through the esoteric magic apparently just for hierophants? Or is it another alternation of times, one of many magical moments compressed into more than twelve beats, and summoned by the mind stretching beyond the supposed structures and powers that be? abreu's video revels in such juxtapositions of ritual and magic contained within sites and temporalities that irresolutely cohere within the everyday. In fact, much like abreu's last line of aleatoric poetry: “push pushy push”—it insists, “ofc ofc ofc,” or, of course, that we continue to recognize this dialectic. Because maybe we're all hierophants.

¹³ McLaughlin and abreu, Conversation with the artist over Zoom, January 31, 2021.