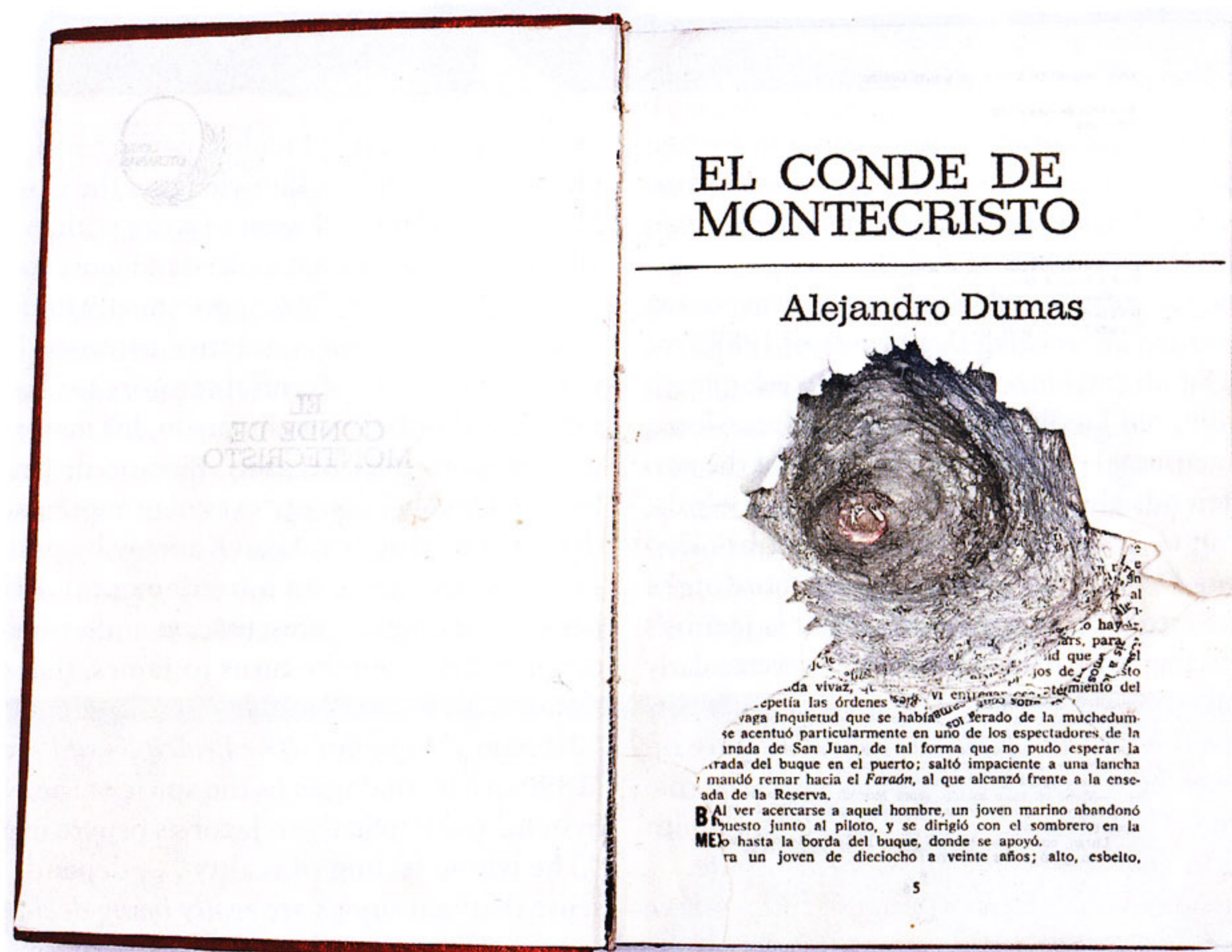


José Antonio Vega Macotela

CHUS MARTÍNEZ



José Antonio Vega Macotela, *Time Divisa 291* (Time Currency 291), 2009, altered book, 8¼ x 6¼ x 4¾". From *Time Divisa* (Time Currency), 2006–10.

GOING DANCING, visiting a prostitute, watching a son's first steps, getting drunk at the baptism of a nephew: These are the kinds of ordinary pleasures and transgressions that make up everyday life, and artist José Antonio Vega Macotela has partaken of all of these experiences. There's nothing remarkable about that—except that in each case, the life Macotela was living belonged to someone else. Neither the son nor the nephew was his, he didn't know the woman with whom he went dancing, and he limited his interactions with the prostitute to conveying a greeting from somebody else. Over the course of his project *Time Divisa* (Time Currency), 2006–10, Macotela

acted as a stand-in for inmates of Mexico City's Santa Marta Acatitla prison, attending to obligations or desires in the place of the incarcerated men. He carried out one or more favors for each of 365 inmates, and in exchange, he asked the inmates to compensate him by performing activities he assigned them in turn. A prisoner might record the fluctuations of his own pulse, map out the steps he'd taken while listening to a certain song, chronicle the history of every scar on his body, or create an acoustic map of prison sounds. For Macotela, this was artistic labor—the things he should have been doing during the hours he spent fulfilling the prisoners' requests. Such inter-

actions unnervingly articulate the continuum between the proxy and the body snatcher, as it were. Macotela was not merely substituting himself for the inmates in an administrative or judicial sense (as in, say, a marriage by proxy, where the corporality of the proxy is secondary to his or her institutional function), but enacting a bluntly physical displacement, becoming, in effect, a father-body, friend-body, son-body, husband-body, erotic body. And, correspondingly, the prisoners became his artist-body.

At the Twenty-ninth São Paulo Bienal in 2010, a presentation of objects produced by the prisoners and videos documenting Macotela's errands (which he showed to the inmates before exhibiting) illuminated the moving, discomfiting, and sometimes comic dramaturgy of this charged negotiation. For example, in return for finding a woman whom an inmate named Kamala had met at a corner store four years previously, Macotela instructed him to employ a nervous tic in his index finger to scratch through the pages of a book, namely, Alexandre Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*, perhaps the most famous prison-break novel of all time. When, after a thirteen-hour search, Macotela came back to the prison bearing the woman's phone number, he found that Kamala had drilled a cone-shaped hole nearly all the way through the substantial tome. Actions like this are compelling on an artistic level, and in fact, many call to mind the work of established contemporary artists. In return for attempting to find the son of an inmate named Mário, for example, Macotela asked the prisoner to remove a brick from his cell. When the artist finally succeeded in locating the child, Mário, of his own accord, carved the phrase *ASI DESAPARECE* (thus it disappears) across several bricks and, repurposing a common improvised device that prisoners use to heat their food, embedded an electric filament in the bricks. The filament makes the sentence glow with the same conceptual intensity as, say, a Cerith Wyn Evans neon. In *Time Divisa*, it is precisely this ricocheting of agency from artist to inmate and back again that generates creative invention—as demonstrated, for

