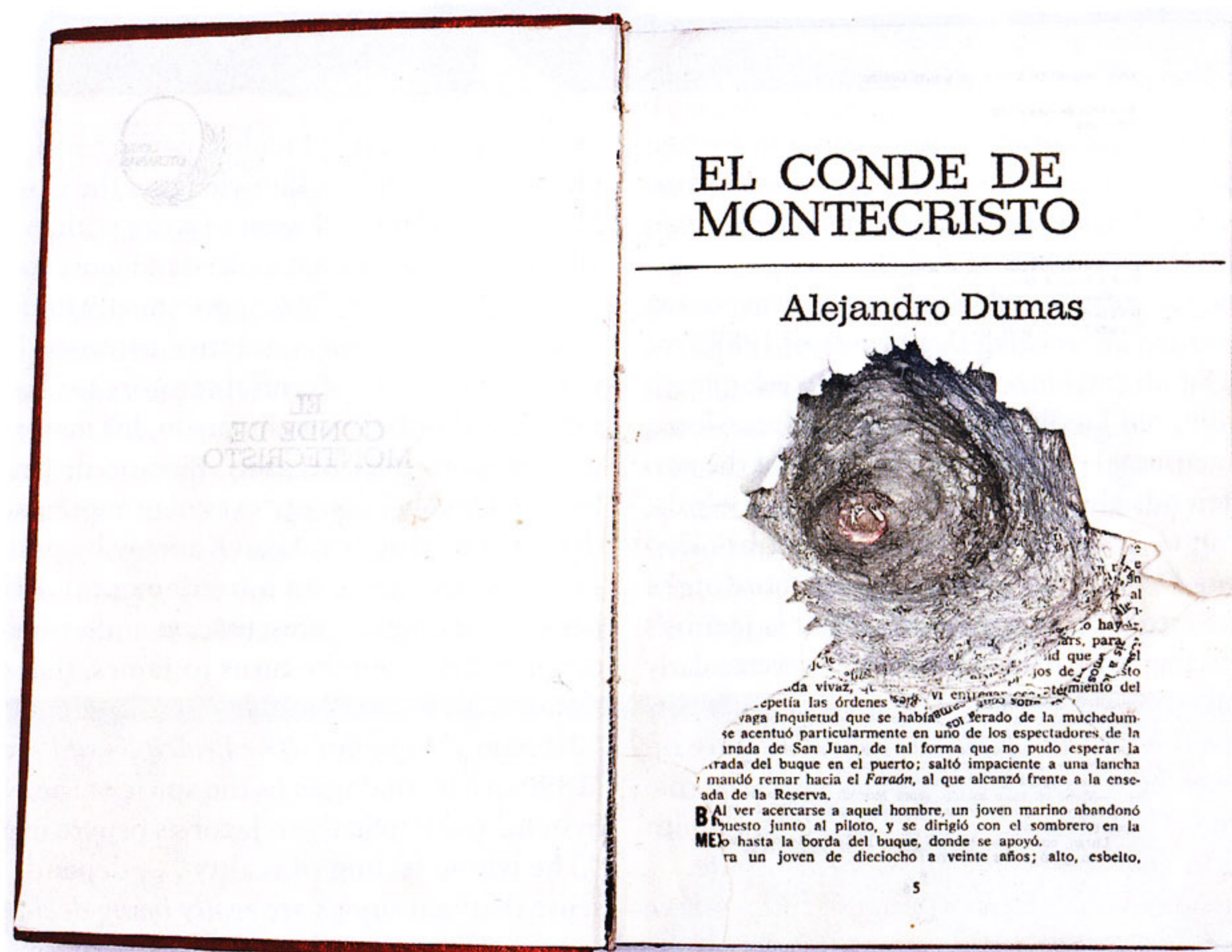


José Antonio Vega Macotela

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



Above: José Antonio Vega Macotela, *Time Divisa* 310, 311, 314 (Time Currency 310, 311, 314), 2009, bricks and electric filament, 35½ x 7 x 3⅞". From *Time Divisa* (Time Currency), 2006–10.

Below: José Antonio Vega Macotela, *Time Divisa* 133, 134, 135, 136, 138, 140 (Time Currency 133, 134, 135, 136, 138, 140) (detail), 2007–2008, shredded books, overall dimensions variable, shown 21⅞ x 5⅞ x 11¾". From *Time Divisa* (Time Currency), 2006–10.



Macotela—avoiding the reflexivity that plagues much participatory art—enters into and intervenes in a system that is already governed by mutual instrumentalization: prison.

instance, in this unpredictable volley: “A group of prisoners asked me to sell their survival strategies as art,” Macotela wrote in a text elucidating one of the exchanges. “I asked them to use my contemporary art books as a source of inspiration. They shredded my books and wove bags.”

There is nothing redemptive, let alone utopian, in *Time Divisa*'s embrace of the mercantile dynamic of quid pro quo or in its imaging of the artist-participant relation. What is crucial to understand is that

Macotela—avoiding the reflexivity that plagues much participatory art, however much it may wish to exceed such boundaries—is entering into and intervening in a system that is already governed by an uncompromising principle of mutual instrumentalization. In prison, one is required to deploy Machiavellian strategies simply to survive. The true politics of Macotela's enterprise is premised on his articulation of possibilities for agency, solidarity, and even trust within *this* system—and by extension, across the “carceral continuum” that Foucault envisioned as contiguous with society as a whole.

Yet perhaps counterintuitively, the theories most germane here are those of radical cartographer Michel de Certeau—his thinking on delinquency being particularly relevant. For Certeau, delinquency is transgression: At once a warping of social space and a narrative force, it cuts through cartographies of control, undoing and displacing the very physical and linguistic codes that govern our lives. Similar transgressions are at stake in Macotela's project, which foregrounds the congruence of story and public space: When he went out on his errands, Macotela was narrating Mexico City as the space of those Foucault named the infamous, those “obscure and ill-fated” individuals who are known to us only through the textual traces of their crushing encounters with power (for instance, through the court transcript that may be the only record of a convict's existence). As the father-body, friend-body, etc., Macotela returned the infamous subject to the somatic realm—it is no longer just a static trace, but an agent capable of movement across time. Prisoners would seem to embody stasis, their enforced idleness and isolation situating them beyond life as it is defined by the production parameters of capital. Whether consciously or not, Macotela freed the prisoners from being mere subjects of an artwork—depictive representations of “the prisoner”—by coproducing intertwined events and creating a dynamic story.

Time Divisa, which will be presented at the Cue Art Foundation in New York this fall, reminds us

that when we speak of artistic research, as we do so often nowadays, we are not only speaking of the fact that many artists conduct exhaustive research before making a work. Nor should we confuse artistic research with contemporary art's proximity to the social sciences and their methods. When artists embark on writing novels, conceiving treatises, discovering archives, devising therapies, or choreographing bodies, they are performing research, seeking forms of knowledge beyond the academic, using their own strategies to study everything that contributes to different formulations of what we call reality.

Macotela's own research might be construed, finally, as a study of duration. With *Time Divisa*, he investigated a means of developing a temporality of the story, of the fictive—a temporality, in other words, that accommodates all the jagged, crisscrossing, heterogeneous narratives of delinquency. Inextricably linked to this effort is the question, crucial to the artist's methodology, of how to assimilate real time, over and above historical time, into the artistic work. Once described or represented, time is frozen. But Macotela's project goes beyond the realm of representation and likeness, insofar as it recasts the prisoners as active agents, engaged in processes of subjectivation that go beyond their cultural function and social circumstances. To accomplish this recasting, Macotela needed to enable movement and connections between the previously disconnected temporalities of the prison and “free” space. He did this by creating, through years of close contact with the prisoners, a kind of “third time” in which the temporalities of inside and outside were synced so as to permit mutual incursions. What is perhaps most compelling and significant about Macotela's project, then, is his effort to recognize the importance, and explore the consequences, of the fact that meaning, however restricted, emerges not from history but from fiction. □

CHUS MARTÍNEZ IS CURRENTLY BASED IN KASSEL, WHERE SHE IS HEAD OF THE CURATORIAL DEPARTMENT OF DOCUMENTA 13 IN THE OFFICES OF THE EXHIBITION'S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR.