

# Recollecting the Future

Matter, Form, and Spectral Violence  
in the Work of Pedro Reyes

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## Abstract

This paper offers an immanent critique of three key works by Mexican sculptor and multimedia artist Pedro Reyes. *Palas por pistolas* (2008), *Imagine* (2012), and *Disarm* (2013–20) each function by transmuting guns confiscated from drug cartels into instruments for positive social change—first shovels for planting trees, and then musical instruments which are later automated and programmed to produce aleatory compositions. Following a cue from Reyes, we interpret this material and psychosocial transmutation as an alchemical process in which latent potencies for new modes of relation are agitated and brought to the surface. In line with the artist’s stated intentions, we discern a definite positive value in the integration of the weapons into a new logic. But the most significant value we identify is negative or, better, *nihilative*, enacting what Adorno describes as a “voluntary involuntary” and, in this way, challenging Reyes’s interpretive prepositioning of his own works. We explore surprising tensions that arise both within and between the works, allowed to stand on their own, when one approaches them from the vantage of a hylomorphic conception of art objects, that is, as composites of matter and form. The gun-instruments, appropriated from an economy of death, deploy as an uncanny counterpower to techno-logical reductionism precisely *because* of the disturbing ambiguity that they reveal in and between the familiar concepts of “matter,” “form,” “substratum,” and “substance.”

## Keywords

Adorno, alchemy, Aristotle, materialism, sculpture, violence

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## 1. Introduction

In August of 2021, the Mexican government filed a lawsuit against U.S. weapons manufacturers, seeking \$10 billion USD in damages related to the dramatic increase of gun violence in Mexico since 2006. In a parallel gesture from the art world, *Return to Sender* (2020) introduces the latest step in Mexican artist Pedro Reyes’s sustained experiment in psychosocial alchemy, locking the violence plaguing his country into precious music boxes to be “sent”—as ironic love letters—to the guns’ places of origin, ringing out in thin mechanical refrains slices of those places’ most celebrated and internationally familiar works of music, or, in the case of Switzerland, Mani Matter’s song “I Han Es Zündhölzli Azündt.” Reyes (b. 1972), a Mexican sculptor and multimedia artist who works in Mexico City, is responding to the volatile conditions that developed in 2006 in the wake of Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s initiation of the so-called “War on Drugs.” The introduction of a significant military presence to the streets of Mexico initiated a protracted period of violence in which Mexicans suffered tremendously, causing damage to the country’s social fabric and spurring dramatic opposition from scholars, artists, and the general public. Reyes’s 2008 project *Palas por pistolas* marks his first contribution to this discourse.

Reyes has received international attention for a series of exhibitions produced between 2008 and 2020 that transform weapons confiscated from drug cartels. He frequently appeals to the concept of alchemy in public statements about these works. In a 2013 op-ed, he writes, “I think about the tradition of alchemy, where, simultaneous with the physical conversion of a substance, a psychological transformation is supposed to occur. As children use former weapons to plant trees, or musicians play instruments that are visibly composed of guns, they engage in a concrete activity that is positive” (Reyes 2013). We argue that *Palas por pistolas* (2008), *Imagine* (2012), and *Disarm* (2013–20) constitute a bold alchemical experiment in which the “invisible violence,” represented by guns, is *transubstantiated* through art. If we understand the “ex-strophic” character of traditional Hellenic and Egyptian alchemy (Dufault 2015) to more precisely entail a *turning out* of what was already there in the unfathomed depths of a thing, it becomes clear that all alchemical change remains haunted by its indeterminate other, a dark surplus whose intransigent quality confuses the boundaries between presence and absence, past and future, fear and hope. Reyes’s experiment is one of *social* no less than *material* alchemy, and each of the three projects marks a progression in his thinking about the relationship between matter, form, and the teleology

of social change. Our task in this paper is to engage with that thinking, pursue its philosophical implications, and mark its limitations.

While the firearms in *Palas por pistolas* disappear into the gardening shovels generated from their smelted materials, the menacing visible form of the weapons is retained in both *Imagine* and *Disarm*, in which pistols, rifles, and shotguns culled by the Mexican army are repurposed as musical instruments. The idea culminates in *Disarm*, for which Reyes automated and made operable via digital algorithms eight of the instruments from *Imagine*, freeing the performance from any appeal to virtuosity and enhancing the uncanny effect of the weapons' self-presentation as agents or, in the language of Bruno Latour, *actants*.<sup>2</sup> Each step of the series explores and demonstrates in a different way "how an agent of death can become an agent of life" (Reyes 2008), even if, despite the positive vision of the artist, the specter of death's agency refuses total elimination. We will think through the unseen liberatory but nonetheless disturbing functionality of this refusal through an immanent critique of Reyes's project(s), drawing on several theorists along the way. Following Adorno, we maintain that, insofar as they have a claim to truth, artworks must be freed to stand on their own as *objects*, that is, as crystalized processes of social mediation. Squaring with the objects themselves, we find that Reyes's overt intentions betray both a naive grasp of the philosophical sense of alchemical change and an objectionable messianism that promises more than art can—or should—fulfill, participating in the very commodity market logic that he claims to challenge and reject.

In other words, Reyes's implicit working from a metaphysics of presence<sup>3</sup>—a conception of the real as identical to the content of thought, and thus as available for control—undermines the critical force of the works themselves. However, as Jameson observes, "[t]o identify the formal contradiction at the heart of a work is not to criticize it but to locate the sources of its production: it is in other words . . . to articulate the form-problem that the work attempts to solve" (2017, 59–60). The peculiar form-problem with which Reyes grapples in his so-described alchemical projects—a form-problem that is not simply presupposed but is in part constituted by his manner of grappling—turns out to be more worthy of reflection than his solutions appear to suggest.

2 For Latour, an actant is "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation by human individual actors, nor of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action" (1996, 7).

3 Cf. Heidegger ([1957] 2002) and Derrida ([1967] 2016).

## 2. Matter and Form

The works present themselves through a formal complex of implicit directives or demands, independently of the artist's own self-conscious aims. Attention to the objects reveals an ongoing process of formation carried out on multiple levels of material and social *deformation*, where certain potentialities are actualized, thereby limiting or suppressing others. Understood hylomorphically, Reyes's gun-instruments, like other human artifacts and natural entities as well, resolve into more or less enduring composites of *matter* and *form*. Aristotle famously enumerated four "causes" [*aitía*] or explanatory principles for all phenomena, of which we will focus principally on (1) the *hyle*, "matter," or "that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists . . . e.g. the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl, and the genera of which the bronze and the silver are species" (*Physics* 194b24–26), and (2) "the shape [*morphe*] or form [*eidos*] which is specified in the definition of the thing" (*ibid.*). In order to foreground some fruitful tensions at play in Reyes's work, a summary account of concepts central to Aristotle's physics will be helpful.

In determining the essence or nature of an entity, Aristotle privileges the formal cause insofar as it is the ground of a thing's becoming what it *is*, in actuality [*energeia*] rather than mere potentiality [*dynamis*]. While my middle-aged tortie cat Jane Birkin is undeniably the fur, flesh, bone, teeth, claws, etc. that constitute her bodily presence, she is much more identifiable in virtue of the way these features are organically structured to fulfill the functions of catness. Human production first unfolds from the artist's conception, which presents a final form abstracted from any material substratum. With this model or blueprint in mind, the artist then imposes it on some appropriate matter, obeying the latter's own intrinsic laws, thus actualizing one possible objective presence [*ousia*] among many. The decision to pursue *this* actualization and not others at the same time freezes the dynamic potentiality of the chosen matter, suspending its agitation in a state of stability that can always be overturned through another formal intervention—to include destructive interventions of seemingly pure de-formation. When an artist or maker deliberately deforms a composite entity in an effort of productive repurposing, there are times at which traces of the previous form remain perceptible but now as part of the material background, indexing at once a past life and that life's futural potentiality as a nonpresence that haunts. It is crucial to keep in mind that "matter" and "form" are abstracted from each other only in theory. *In concreto*, there is no matter without form or form without matter. Even the

most chaotic heap of random material elements is still *formally* recognizable as . . . a chaotic heap of random material elements.

As Heidegger argues in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, “[t]he distinction of matter and form is *the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics*” ([1935] 1971, 26–27, emphasis in original). Thus, although this schema has undergone significant modification through the path of its historical unfolding, our decision to take it as our point of departure is not arbitrary. What, we ask, is the *hyle* in Reyes’s alchemical designs? What is the *eidos*, the “form?” Since form follows function, the gun-instruments *are* devices for musical production, despite their contrary semblance. Reyes’s partial and essentially functional deformation of the confiscated weapons towards this end, we suggest, reveals a profound undercurrent to the theory of hylomorphism, which Aristotle neither explicitly alludes to nor even intimates. These objects, as sculptures, as musical instruments, show that the *hyle* must bear within its own *dynamis* the memory of what has yet to come, a recollection [*anamnesis*] that unfolds *forward*, even as it is haunted by the *forms* of the past. In other words, while it is true that the guns, the cartel’s “agents of death,” performed wildly unmusical functions, it is no less true that in so doing they were already inscribed with a kind of spectral potency of otherness—musical otherness—demanding to be *turned out* by force of the objects’ own intrinsic material principles. The actual assault rifle is simultaneously, at the level of radical material *potentiality*, a flute, and/or a guitar, and/or a drum, and/or so on. We must not forget that these primitive proto-guitars, industrial-grade flutes, and disturbingly flat-sounding percussive devices behaved not long before as the stuff of nightmares, active principles of death and the rupturing of community. This forgetting marks in an essential way the failure of the project *qua* “work” of art, which we would expect to *work* as a form of recollection in itself.

The ambiguity of the Greek concept of “matter” in connection with modern and contemporary materialisms (according to which “matter” is a homogeneous bearer of properties) is precisely the undecidability between the terms *hyle* (matter) as elucidated above, *hypokeimenon* (substratum), and *ousia* (substance, presence). The spectral violence that constitutes the *substance* of the gun-instruments’ music is definable in the mutually implicative terms of this conceptual indeterminacy. What is the *presence* of these sounds, discoverable in transitory ways in and by bodies? What is that which *lies under* the presence, accessible only by analogy, gathering together the presencing as such, despite the transitoriness of this or that concrete sound? In other words, what is the *hypokeimenon*, the “substratum”? What gets predicated of what? Can I predicate a “gun

form” of the instrument? Or can I predicate an “instrument form” of the gun? What ground supports what presence? What presence (analogically) *presents* what ground? Finally, what is the “matter,” the *stuff*, at dynamic play, tracing its silent potentiality through the presented thing? This tension, this undecidability, is essential to the peculiar aesthetic demands of the instrument and its ghostly emanations.

*Palas por pistolas*, Reyes’s first alchemical experiment, *points to* the radical implications of Aristotelian hylomorphism for aesthetic interventions into the social, but accomplishes little more. The *form* of the pistols was destroyed in a manner appropriate to the materials. Formed into shovels, the materials previously put to work in the service of violence now serve the end of planting the seeds of life. Reyes describes the project as follows on his official website:

1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone [where] they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act. The pieces were then taken to a foundry and melted. The metal was sent to a major hardware factory to produce the same number of 1527 shovels. The tools were made under specifications such as a handle with a legend telling the story. [The] shovels have been distributed to a number of art institutions and public schools where adults and children engage in the action of planting 1527 trees. (Reyes 2008)

For Reyes, this is a form of “upcycling,” in which the artist appropriates discarded materials and moves them in a spiritual direction towards the Good. At once an ecological and aesthetic practice for the transformation of social conditions, upcycling makes sense within the logic of Aristotle’s hylomorphism as articulated above. Just as the silver of the bowl Aristotle gives as an example can be melted and repurposed into a pendant or ceremonial knife, the plastic bottles accumulating in our landfills and choking the oceans can be re-formed in the production of low-waste grocery bags, exercise clothing, and even automotive parts. Other notable artistic upcyclers include Derek Gores, who creates portraits and collages out of old magazines, discarded labels, and other similar materials; Vik Muniz, a producer of complex photographic objects out of such surprising ephemera as chocolate, jelly, and trash; and Khalil Chishtee, a Pakistani sculptor who fashions ghostly figures out of recycled plastic bags in an effort to “recycle our identity.”

In the case of *Palas por pistolas*, by contrast, it is difficult to say what marks the work *as* artwork; hasn’t Reyes here simply made himself a facilitator of gardening tools that one might purchase, say, at Home Depot? As works of *art*, it remains significant that the 1,527 shovels used to plant



1,527 trees used to be 1,527 weapons. Yet, Reyes elides this history in the cancellation of the form. In this case, then, we find a present hylomorphic substance—a synthesis of matter and form—*haunted*, not, as is always true, by the unique potency of the *hyle*, but by an annihilated form which is easily forgotten.

Easily forgotten—but for the legend “telling the story,” which Reyes helpfully affixed to each of the shovel handles. Is this where the *work* of the artwork lies? Is Reyes really a kind of poet, a producer of *text*? But the text only serves as a more or less indifferent *document* of the event, which is itself only one possible instantiation of the *concept*. Reyes is therefore a conceptual artist in the tradition of Joseph Kosuth and Douglas Huebler, the latter having once declared “[t]he world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I don’t wish to add any more” (Art Institute of Chicago 1974, 36). But the totems of past violence refuse oblivion in the indifference of textual narrative. As is evidenced by the one-to-one logic of the elaborated alchemical process (i.e., one weapon for one shovel for one tree), Reyes recognizes that the matter–form assemblage, and its fundamental undecidability, is not arbitrary; the peculiar power of art to *manifest* a world, and thus also the conditions of its interrogation, requires a concrete arrangement of matter with its own dialectical history for this coming-to-appear.

It is in the above sense that aesthetic *form*, that in virtue of which art “opposes the empirical,” amounts to what Adorno calls “sedimented content” ([1950] 1997, 5). The aesthetic *form* of artworks is that through which they “speak,” and such “speech” is nothing other than the “communication of everything particular in them” (*ibid.*) as a sedimented material history—a kind of “content”—irreducible to the facticity of the work’s empirical presence. Hence, in the next iterations of Reyes’s project the guiding problem evolves from the *matter–form* nexus to that of *form* and *content*. So restaged, however, as we will see, the new formulation cannot escape the menacing exigency of the material. Adorno tells us that “[i]n art, there is as much and as little progress as in society” (208), and, much earlier in the same text, that “[t]he unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (6). Contrary to how Reyes would have it, “[t]his, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society” (*ibid.*). Art cannot save society, and this is because artworks are themselves entangled with (though not reducible to) the latter’s productive logic; their peculiar power lies in bringing these tensions to the surface without explicitly articulating or simply reproducing them in another empirical scene.

### 3. Form and Content

Reyes's next project in this series, *Imagine* (2012), which he regards as “a progression of *Palas por pistolas*” (Reyes 2012), involved the fabrication of fifty musical instruments out of decommissioned weapons. *Imagine* pursues a similar tactic of transmutation, but, in this case, in order to create a unique aesthetic experience—understood as the nonidentical converse of the everyday<sup>4</sup>—instead of garden tools. The challenge was not only to transform the materials, but to enable the re-formed objects to produce musical sound. For Reyes, a sculptor, music has the transformative capacity to shape material presences and processes: “It also connects with ideas of social sculpture, in the physical transformation of the original materials, which also triggers psychological and social transformation. At the moment the new instruments are played they become agents of change, creating a musical event at which people gather in a positive manner” (Neri 2013). Previously the guns brought forth death. Now they bring forth music. However, since Reyes neither composes the music nor directly decides the direction of the sound the instruments produce, he is not in control of the social transformation that he strives to instigate. This tension is significant because it magnifies both the perverse power and presence of the objects, and the naivety of Reyes concerning his own works.

*Imagine*, as performed, shows the impossibility of harmonic coincidences between text and music.<sup>5</sup> The title comes from John Lennon's famous song of the same name, and the harmony and mellow interpretation preserved from Lennon's original only enhance the contradictions that this version presents. The lyrics are idyllic and full of hope, while the music barely reaches the prescribed tuning and therefore materializes the discomfort that the words seek to forget. A group of six professional musicians performed the song at concerts in Mexico City, Gwangju, Istanbul, and London. While participants gathered in positive anticipation of each performance, they encountered a surprising negativity: the music remained subtly out of tune, the sound of the instruments was harsh, and the musical range that the performers could reproduce was quite limited. Yet their joyous facial expressions betray an obliviousness to the impossibility of their aim. The flutist demonstrates his virtuosity as if playing *just a flute*, celebrating the musical form's successful overcoming of the

4 “Art's separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality reproduced in this process” (Marcuse 1977, 22).

5 *Imagine Concierto*. YouTube, October 9, 2012. 5:59. URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGItM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGItM).



vile materials. The show manifests a desire to recover the innocence expressed in Lennon's song, and as such amounts to an ingenuousness that ironically highlights the important negative tension at work.

By presenting this interpretation, Reyes is, like Lennon, "a dreamer," but, as dreamers do, he compresses and unwittingly actualizes the dark reality. The performance at once articulates utopia in the words and participates in everyday violence through the sound. Reyes describes and prescribes a positive public interaction but appears to miss the negative dimension at play. An immanent critique of the work in its own working manifests antagonisms that cannot be smoothed out in the neutralizing light of authorial intention. In the words of Adorno, "artistic productivity is the capacity for being voluntarily involuntary" ([1951] 2005, 222). Appropriating substantial symbols of pure hostility and nihilation as material parts for the articulation of a whole simply underlines the impossibility of the disappearance *in toto* of materiality into form. The dark remainder of the *hyle* simultaneously threatens the stability of *and* vouchsafes art's emancipatory power as an essential human possibility.

The content or "message" is ambiguous, blurry; it can be hard to tell if the music is presenting a relief *from* the violence or if it is *presenting* violence as a strong tendency. The ambiguity shows up as a confusion among the alethic modalities of possibility, reality, and necessity: what *may* be, what *is*, what *must* be, i.e., what is *determined* and/or what is *called for but has never been*. Further, such modal confusion manifests concretely in one's orientation to time, bringing into strange coincidence the "always already" of the pluperfect, and the mantic confidence of the future perfect. Jacques Attali articulates this vortical confusion, this alchemical undercurrent of out- and in-turning, in a discussion of the prophetic power of music:

Music explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. (Attali [1977] 2009, 11)

Reyes's exploration of materiality and its proper *dynamis* foregrounds ambiguity; his instruments may nurture this prophetic capacity of music. But such a capacity is contingent on musical interpretation–adaptation, that is, on an intractable source of difference that threatens to undermine and call into question the purposes, conventions, and expectations assumed

and put into operation through Reyes's intentional schemes.<sup>6</sup> Reyes is giving new form to sedimented violence, and the musical sounds made possible only by that reformation enact in disturbing ways the violence's persistence. When he aims to transcend daily life by making audible the new world, he actualizes the totemic effect of the guns, echoing their fateful shots into the present.

For *Imagine* and *Disarm*, Reyes preserved the recognizable gun-form in order to change its production of content from death to music. Hannah Arendt claims that "Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power" (1970, 53). In this sense, *Imagine* foregrounds the surprising impotence of gun-violence through an alchemical out-turning of the *substance* of these particular guns. What comes out of them now is material sound and not the material bullet, the former's ephemeral character and lack of solidity—its marginality at the place of the material as such—being of central import. The music, then, erases the possibility of killing while exercising but not exorcizing a *spectral* violence that is irreducible to mere "representation" or "simulation." *Mimesis*, imitation, is at once *methexis*, participation (Nancy 2016, 82). However, such a transmutation is not purely creative: the instrument-sound is an appropriation of the original gun-sound. Thus, what Reyes proposes is the possibility of translating violence into something that he characterizes as a positive, shared human experience, while at the same time undercutting the pleasure that one usually expects from music. Reyes strives to do both: to manifest some level of hope, and to

- 6 The infamous Slovenian avant-garde group Laibach has consistently exploited and demonstrated the radical potential of this aspect of performance qua interpretation, "translating" celebrated works of Western pop music to reveal disturbing undercurrents in the "originals," from Queen's "One Vision" to the Beatles' album *Let It Be*, and, more recently, the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*. In the liner notes to their reinterpretation of the latter (a 2018 album also called *The Sound of Music*), the band provocatively quotes Kim Jong Il's *On the Art of Opera*:

Adaptation translates the ideological content of one original work into another in conformity with the characteristics of the latter form of art, literature or music. It requires the re-interpretation of a work in accordance with the characteristic of a different context on the principle of transforming the ideological content of the original . . . Adaptation is not technical practical work simply to translate a work into another form but a creative endeavor that requires originality. Originality in this work can ensure a more life-like and impressive portrayal of the seed of the original.

preserve the haunting threat of the violence that has been sublated. The music generated by the gun-instruments does not *describe* violence; it is not *social commentary*. Rather, it *lives* the violence in a gesture that cancels itself in a strange vortex, a locus of *in-* and *out-turning*, where the categories *real*, *necessary*, and *possible*, and tenses *past*, *present* and *future*, coalesce like the posset of Heraclitus's fragment: "even the barley-drink separates if it is not stirred" (DK B125).

We can find the ambiguity at work in Reyes's project, an ambiguity he tries to suppress, presaged in another fragment of Heraclitus: "The bow's [βίος] name is life [βίος] but its work is death" (DK B48). The harmony or attunement attained by the mutual working of the gun's parts is the death-dealing violence of its projectiles, the projection of death itself. The projection of the appropriated gun, in contrast, the "harmony"—whether mellifluous or dissonant—of its sounds, carries a transformation of the *living* body, but not in such a way that the gun's attunement is simply annulled. Is it now the *ground* of the life-trans-formative sound? Is it then a ground that *haunts*? Hence, again, we encounter the spectral violence of a presence that does not erase or bury its "other side," but which cannot *figure* its converse either, not without destroying the converse as such. To perform Lennon's song as an expression of radical hope is to purge the object of violence, but this ignores the way it stands forth *as* a gun even if it can be manipulated to approximate a flute. In fact, the optimistic air in which the instrument is strained to accompany a soft and mellow voice only heightens the brutality of the gun and makes more palpable the presence of the dead. The *telos* of the artist to purify the object of its past is a complete failure, but this failure is brought about by force of the object itself, which, as a crystallization of suffering, "weighs on the subject" (Adorno [1966] 1973, 17–18) in a way that is not "subjective." The object is capable of showing its truth, a necessary precondition of which, as Adorno asserts, is "the need to lend a voice to suffering" (17). The intention of enjoying this music as one does at a typical pop concert, of experiencing its "beautiful and amazing sounds," as the curator Nicholas Chambers puts it in a video about *Disarm*,<sup>7</sup> speaks to the ongoing commodification of violence in contemporary society and the will to transform the suffering of others into diverse forms of pleasure and entertainment.

The music for *Imagine* was played by well trained musicians who adapted to the novel instruments. But they performed music *inadequate* to those instruments: the instruments' *hyle*, that is, the visible gun-form,

7 Art Gallery of NSW, "Pedro Reyes 'Disarm' | #TogetherInArt What's in the Box?" (2020). URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4-RbMfya4o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4-RbMfya4o).

is defiantly manifest, menacing the music and the materiality of its performance. Hence, the violence that is present in this way is transmuted into a liminal awareness of the negative reality through the music. This possibility, as discussed above, is beyond, and at odds with, the artist's goal of making "positive" use of art. As a self-standing work, *Imagine* explores the space towards which we gestured above: that undecidability between *hyle*, *hypokeimenon*, and *ousia*. Through the destabilizing slippage between *matter*, *substratum*, and *substance*, *Imagine* opens a radical moment in which musician, machine, and audience give shape to a critical substance that renews itself. Yet this potent assemblage is set in crisis when the artist insists on the "positive" purpose of his work and claims that the material change replaces violence with something new. What Reyes intends is impossible, and what he pretends to do with the materials would be palatable to a society without memory, or else a form of reified memory that is acceptable only when the objects tied to it facilitate pleasure or enjoyment.

#### 4. Revelation and Technique

It is in the disagreement between the thetic intention of Reyes's prescriptions and the disturbing recalcitrance of the objects that much of the revelatory force of *Imagine* lies. In the language of Heidegger, it constitutes a "shock" (*Stoss*, literally a blow or thrust) in which the listener is normatively *displaced* from ordinary, socially entrenched modes of relation. For Heidegger, "to submit to this displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to the world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work" ([1950] 2001, 64). From the perspective of Heidegger's well-known critique of technology, the reductive ordering of the world and what shows up as possible through technical artifacts, such as guns, is suspended or called into question by the "shock" of the work of art, setting up those who "submit" to its nonviolent working to value and even *perceive* the world and its entities in a radically new way. *Art* work and *technology* work are thus infinitely separated to the extent that they are intimately connected (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 16).

The equivocal status of the work, where the threat of the weapons is annulled but sustained vestigially in the musical performance as a present absence, is necessary for the working of the work itself. Reyes's techno-optimism, the dominant form taken by the metaphysics of presence in the twenty-first century, prevents him from recognizing this disturbing but

fruitful counterpower at play. Describing the sublimatory intention of his approach, for example, Reyes asserts that “the physical act is always accompanied by an idealistic one and appeals to the spiritual dimension of this quasi-alchemical operation towards the good” (Goldman 2020). But the transcendence that such an idealistic gesture presupposes is really a veiled immanence, that is, the subjection of human interpreters to normative conditions of reality, or, in the language of Markus Gabriel (2015), “fields of sense.”<sup>8</sup> Works of art are in fact part of reality, perceptual and intelligible, constituting fields of sense whose scope extends beyond what gets characterized as “meaning,” i.e., what the artist in each case is supposed to have *meant* and realized through technique. As Gabriel puts it in *The Power of Art*, “Monet cannot produce my impressions, my psychological state. The artist by herself can neither predict nor produce the aesthetic experience I undergo in appreciating a work” (2020, 19). Consequently, “art itself is uncontrollable. No one, not even the artist, is in a position to steer the history of art” (7).

Reyes organized a group of musicians to open the *Disarm* exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in London on May 4, 2013. In this and later concerts, the performers, sometimes as many as nine, improvised free jazz on a selection of instruments derived from *Imagine*: polished hunks of steel make primitive drums, long rifle barrels framed by interlocking magazines hold taut three strings for what looks like a postapocalyptic lyre, arresting, atavistic shrieks crawl improbably out of an assault-clarinet, while one player attacks a xylophone fashioned from deconstructed pistols. The “Kalashniclock,” a circular percussion instrument constructed out of AK-47 barrels and twelve of the weapon’s iconic curved magazines, is particularly striking. The musicians, appearing like a postindustrial approximation of Ennio Morricone’s legendary Gruppo di improvvisazione nuova consonanza, would sit in a misshapen circle or some other formation in which their orientation to the audience was indirect and indifferent. Reyes did not participate as a musician in these events, and the players relied on techniques of avant-garde free improvisation, having no score or previous

8 For Gabriel, to exist at all means to “appear in a field of sense” (2015, 158), which

provides objective structures and interacts with the objects appearing within it. [The field] is already there, and objects can pass through it and change its properties. Fields are not horizons or perspectives; they are not epistemological entities or objects introduced to explain how we can know how things are. They are an essential part of how things are in that without fields, nothing could exist. (157–58)

preparation to follow. The live music of *Disarm* is grounded in the groundlessness of the individual performers' exploration of the various instruments' possibilities. In each iteration, the singularity of the instruments is sharpened.

Reyes was especially attentive to the visible form of the objects. He wanted to preserve their appearance as harmful, but also to make evident their dysfunctionality as sources of harm: "The various parts of these automatons are recognizable as shotguns, pistols and rifles; while they no longer pose the threat of physical harm, they keep the sheer might of their most recent purpose" (Reyes 2013). The "sheer might" of the ersatz killing machines is preserved in its very negation, a measure which, in virtue of the operativity of the machinic as such, unfolds itself objectively in the relation of the various parts of the work to the field as a whole. The conceptual progression from *Imagine* to *Disarm* is marked most essentially by Reyes's elimination of human performers from subsequent versions of the latter's exhibitions: "These machines are mechanical musical instruments; they can be programmed and operated via computers, making them capable of performing music concerts with compositions prepared beforehand" (*ibid.*). *Disarm's* freeing of the instruments from ongoing technical manipulation, a status that was never possible for the guns, results in the material realization of the machinic dream through the dynamic *formation* of a loosely aleatory performance, the absence of a performer of which operates as a most disturbing presence. As an automated orchestra, the aesthetic field at work carries out the machinic dreams of the castrated shotguns, pistols, and rifles to one day perform preprogrammed compositions in the bright air of the Lisson Gallery.<sup>9</sup> These dreams must be supposed to have gripped the machines even in their former, less reputable lives characterized by circulation in economies of death. Repelled by the notion that the objects might be praised or glorified despite their formal displacement, Reyes insists that the "pacifist" message of the work must be clear "so that the idea has currency for a general audience" (*ibid.*). But the truth opened up by the work depends in part on the dark allure of the guns *qua* guns; without the recalcitrance of this *hyle*, already a *tode ti*, a "this something," de-forming itself, the "message" would achieve total self-coincidence and so either disappear or remain somehow kitsch.

9 See *DISARM at Lisson Gallery* (YouTube, 10 April 2013, 9:54, URL: [youtube.com/watch?v=Kpuu8InHlvA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpuu8InHlvA)) and *Disarm (Mechanized) II* (YouTube, 22 August 2015, 4:38, URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Nq\\_RGQuc8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7Nq_RGQuc8)).



Reyes's messianic intentions betray a teleological conception of art. In this view, works of art work in but one temporal direction (defined in terms of "progress") and are justifiable only within the boundaries of a reified, romantic logic. His efforts to preempt and shape our interpretation of his works are an attempt to prevent the work from speaking for itself and to present them as mechanisms through which to change the present into a happy future. However, as Benjamin reminds us:

[O]ur image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. (Benjamin [1935] 1968, 254)

The artist's fixing of the objects with a very specific *telos*, coupled with his idealist conception of history that trades on an ideological notion of progress, effectively grasps after just such a "cheap" defrayal. Reyes's conceit that he can transmute shit into gold fails to recognize that doing so does not dispense with the shit. The shit is still there as the gold's less than pleasant converse: the *other*, unseen side of one's horizon of sense. In Adorno's language ([1969] 2005, 150), this understanding of alchemy is ultimately undialectical, falling into the trap of Hegel's fetishization of progress. If you fail to take seriously the shit *qua* shit, then you aren't transforming anything.

An essential part of this spectral *form-ation* is indeed the preserved fetishistic quality of the guns, which conceals itself while the objects are operative *as* guns, not despite, but *because* guns are fetishes. In a dense section of his *Minima Moralia* ([1951] 2005) titled "Magic Flute," Adorno traces the Kantian aesthetic criterion of "purposiveness without purpose," and the contemplative attitude in which the subject attends it, back to a frustrated omnipotence: "Contemplation, as a residue of fetishist worship, is at the same time a stage in overcoming it. As radiant things give up their magic claims, renounce the power with which the subject invested them and hoped with their help himself to wield, they become transformed into images of gentleness, promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature" (224). What emerges as a possibility is not a new but still arbitrary power, not, that is, a mere redistribution—even if more *egalitarian*—of already existing potencies; the *transformation* at issue is precisely that of the suspension of power as such. The peculiar potency of art lies in its *powerlessness*, which is not to be understood as weakness. There is,

rather, a kind of “magic” to the subtle “powerlessness” of art, the magic of beauty itself: “In the magic of what reveals itself in absolute powerlessness, of beauty, at once perfection and nothingness, the illusion of omnipotence is mirrored negatively as hope” (*ibid.*). Reyes’s artifacts, whose form consists of historically sedimented contents, contain this “magic,” an attribute that he does not acknowledge. By identifying his works of art as agents of social transformation, as the loci of a concrete and material power that is factually capable of changing our society, Reyes actually diminishes their paradoxically potent *powerlessness*. This claim made against the work of art in its “self-refusal” and “self-contained independence” (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 31) connotes a well-intentioned sentimentalism according to which the function of art is frequently confused with that of activism. The two spheres can and do meet, but the subordination of the former to the latter ignores the crucial sense in which, to paraphrase Heiner Müller, hewing closely to Benjamin’s thinking, art is not “humane” and revolutions mostly serve to “put the brakes on history” (Müller 1990).

As alluded to above, guns, as technological artifacts, are not value-neutral instruments awaiting a freely determined purpose. On the contrary, as Heidegger has laid bare, products of technology enframe the world in reductive ways by revealing material nature itself as mere resource for human ends of domination and control, and this systematic ordering of the possible into strict regimes of actuality cannot help but extend its reach into interhuman relations as well (Heidegger [1954] 1977, 18). In this role, the availability of guns reveals bodies in the world *as* objects to be annihilated, in virtue of which guns *work* a kind of violence even before a single shot is fired. Such is their fetishistic appeal as totems of power, even if—as Arendt argues—this violence in itself is insufficient to actualize power. The appeal is precisely, in Adorno’s words, “the illusion of omnipotence” ([1951] 2005, 224–25): the barbaric, Hobbesian fantasy of the firearm as the great equalizer.

What happens when these decommissioned totems are deprived of their hidden violent enframement in the *reworking* that is Reyes’s work? Something uncanny. Quite literally we see fetishes of violence “transformed into images of gentleness, of a happiness cured of domination over nature.” The locus of the active transformation is preserved in the image of the neutered weapons, thus establishing the sculptural-(auto)musical work as what Adorno describes in *Aesthetic Theory* as a “force field” of relational tension. The tension at play is precisely “the element of ‘form’ in which form gains its inner substance by virtue of its relation to its other” and is the result of “dissonant experiences or antinomical relations in the work” (Adorno [1970] 1997, 292). “Through its

inner tension,” Adorno goes on, “the work is defined as a force field even in the arrested moment of its objectivation” (*ibid.*). The tension between the muted violence of the weapons and the gentle, palliative promise of musical voices, even if dissonant, is maintained in dynamic play, unfolding a spatio-temporal contexture—inhabited, preserved, and augmented in different ways by the audience—that makes up the substantial *form* of the work as a whole. In Heidegger’s words, the “shock” of the work issues from its presence in a state of “agitated repose,” a kind of nonviolent vibration comparable to the stasis achieved by a hummingbird in flight.

The privileging of form (*eidos*) over matter (*hyle*) in Aristotelian metaphysics as the real source of substantial determination tends to obscure the fact that, even by the lights of this very metaphysics, there is no purely indeterminate *hyle* or even proto-*hyle*. Bare materiality without form is not even thinkable. In the case of *Disarm*, the *hyle* is the guns themselves, not the steel, wood, and plastic out of which the guns were generated through technological processes. For this reason, the *eidos*, the *form*, must be interpreted not simply as the automated musical performance and its preprogrammed composition, but as a dynamic act of *de-formation*, where the semiotically sedimented *hyle* is quietly, continuously, and necessarily without end “attacked” or eroded by its “other.” This, in the Heraclitean vocabulary of Heidegger, is the “strife” of the work’s working, which is instigated and kept going by and in the rift (*Riss*) opened up between *figure* and *ground*. With its multiple points of shock, this “strife,” which “is nothing violent” (Heidegger [1950] 2001, 64), is all the more evocative in Reyes’s work precisely because of the disturbing ambiguity of the figure–ground relation that originates and sustains its operative space. In the positive vision of Reyes, the “figure” must be the salvatory message of the music. But, like the marble “behind” or “beneath” Michelangelo’s *David*, set forth to glisten *as* marble, as if for the first time, *by* the figural presencing of a form, the .357 Magnum pistol that serves as ground for one of Reyes’s hi-hats rises up by force of its spectral menace to the level of figure.

## 5. Conclusion

By harnessing the efficient design of killing machines and reforming it into its other, Reyes’ work *presents* the allure of guns, but in an extraordinary way that resists both romantic justification and unequivocal symbolic representation. Thus, it is crucial for the working of the work, understood as an independently operating field, that the *positivity* of the overtly “pos-

itive message” is not realized in any final sense through a mere *negation* or cancelation of the guns’ violence. The work, in the words of Adorno, is a “force field” in which a tangle of social tensions is exposed and preserved but, being removed from the productive and economic logic of commodification, refuses to settle into a clear affirmation or denial. The spectral violence haunting the instruments refuses absolute negation, and this quiet obstinacy is a nihilating source of discomfort in virtue of which the work resists co-optation by the art world or music industry. Such a refusal persists despite, rather than because, of Reyes’s public pronouncements regarding the meaning and value of his own work. Reyes explicitly postures himself as somehow operating above the processes of commodity capitalism from which the guns emerged—interrupting or challenging its flow. But he is participating in the very process he claims to critique by extending it into different markets by way of different cultural institutions.

The violence that Reyes alchemically attenuates can be falsely identified as a problem peculiar to Mexico. However, given that this work has circulated mostly through advanced industrialized countries, it can be said that Reyes is redistributing, relocating, and displacing the revelatory violence of the gun-instruments as both vibrant historical documents and force fields constituted of suffering. By introducing to hallowed museum spaces a concrete node of communal trauma, *Disarm* effectively materializes the depth of a reality marked by the visible and unseen scars of global economic dynamics, and the production, circulation, consumption, and cultural representations of drugs and guns. Adorno suggests that the *documental* power of music, which is not to be understood as naively empirical, but rather as *truth bearing*, issues from the kind of play between *form* and *formed* (whether conceived as “matter” or “content”) that has been at the center of this essay. He writes:

All forms of music, not just those of expressionism, are sedimented contents. In them survives what is otherwise forgotten and is no longer capable of speaking directly. What once sought refuge in form subsists anonymously in form’s persistence. *The forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents.* ([1970] 1997, 37; emphasis added)

The philosophical interpretation we present in this paper resonates with Reyes’s stated purpose to “create psychological transformation and social transformation” in response to guns’ creation of “fear” (Reyes 2013); however, by focusing on the alchemically ineliminable *dark obverse* of the positive vision as an essential component of that transformation, we have tried to pursue a descriptive path more respectful of the works’ objective

independence. *Disarm* is a bridge between past, present, and future because it presents us with the material hauntings of the past and motivates an alteration of relational modes to and in our present which is at once, whether implicitly or explicitly, the projection of a meaningful *not yet*. To identify the work of art as a “force field,” as Adorno does, is to name it as the vortical space that keeps open the undecidability between the real, the possible, and the necessary—that point of simultaneous distance and overlap between the *pluperfect* and the *future perfect*. The pertinence of Adorno’s ideas to the philosophical illumination of Reyes’s work is reflected in Lutz Koepnick’s reminder of what Adorno’s “modernist view” was all about:

to keep alive the promise of a future able to eliminate fear, the promise of a future in which we no longer need to dread what cannot be predicted and in which we can be curious about what exceeds existing templates of interpretation, explanation, and understanding. (Koepnick 2017, 31)

The importance of Reyes’s work lies in the tension manifested in the transmutation of materials and the negative experience transmitted through sound, performance and appearance. The hope and social change that Reyes envisions and attempts to enact is made real not because of his good intentions, but because of a latent negativity that can be exercised but never exorcized, a nihilating ground that can never be figured, but which, nonetheless, the music and physical aspects of the instruments reveal. This material effect surpasses the presuppositions that pre-form his effort, thereby demonstrating the dimension of the “voluntarily involuntarily” formulated by Adorno. The negative materiality of both the re-formed pieces and the sound generated by them, in the making-present of an absence, a kind of haunting, is called for by the working of the work. This thrust of the haunted form’s conflict with an entirely new and incalculable dawning of sense arrests the participant in a kind of shock, in Heidegger’s sense unpacked above, consequently treating the “public” itself as a material to be turned inside out in the impossible task of locating its own, de-formed and de-forming, *hyle*, the veritable *stuff of which it is made*.

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