

CM: I wanted to start this conversation by discussing our own memories and the fact that we originally met in San Francisco in the early 2000s, which was such an incredibly beautiful and generative moment in the art scene. This was right after the dot.com bust, which resulted in a mass exodus of tech workers, and the return of artists, musicians, etc. who were so central to the community. This period was also before smartphones and the widespread use of social media, so everyone's experience of temporality and hanging out seemed much more attuned to the present, and to each other. We were both attending the same nightclubs, like Aunt Charlie's Lounge, and parties, and you were always this incredibly bright light, in a fully conceived outfit, holding court on the dance floor. When I look back, I personally remember a lot of joy and exuberance and creativity, mixed with the ennui and struggles of growing up. What are your memories of this time? What have you taken with you from this experience? Has it influenced your practice or perspective?

RDN: I partially grew up in San Diego, which had this interesting contrast of being a military town based around navy bases with a very hardcore, transgressive punk scene in the 1990s—specifically Ché Café at the UC San Diego campus. Coming from Mexico, which had this community and tradition of folk performance and then moving to San Diego, it felt like I had nothing until I discovered DIY music and DIY culture itself.

San Diego allowed for me to dream about what it would be like to create my own experience. San Francisco was always somewhere that I fantasized about because of its queer culture, its nostalgia for the 60s and the 70s, because of how vital people became to that city itself, and because of all the music that came out of there, the arts. During our time, I felt like we were experiencing something of the same, because we did see things change quite dramatically as San Francisco developed into a technology capital.

I moved [to San Francisco] because I wanted to be in art school, but that was not the path I ended up taking. I met all of the artists at these schools, and this allowed me to understand that there was an entry point to things outside of academia. I think of Dore Alley, Needles & Pens, and all of these zine-based places... They allowed me to think about being a musician and creating and making art for my own purpose.

I'm still best friends with David Toro and Solomon Chase from *DIS Magazine*, and David went to the San Francisco Art Institute. I saw them develop their own parties, which allowed for everyone to come together at that point. We would all dress up and just create chaos. It was an invitation to self-expression. That, to me, has always embodied the idea of how we create these moments in our life. It really shows us that the path is open for all of us.

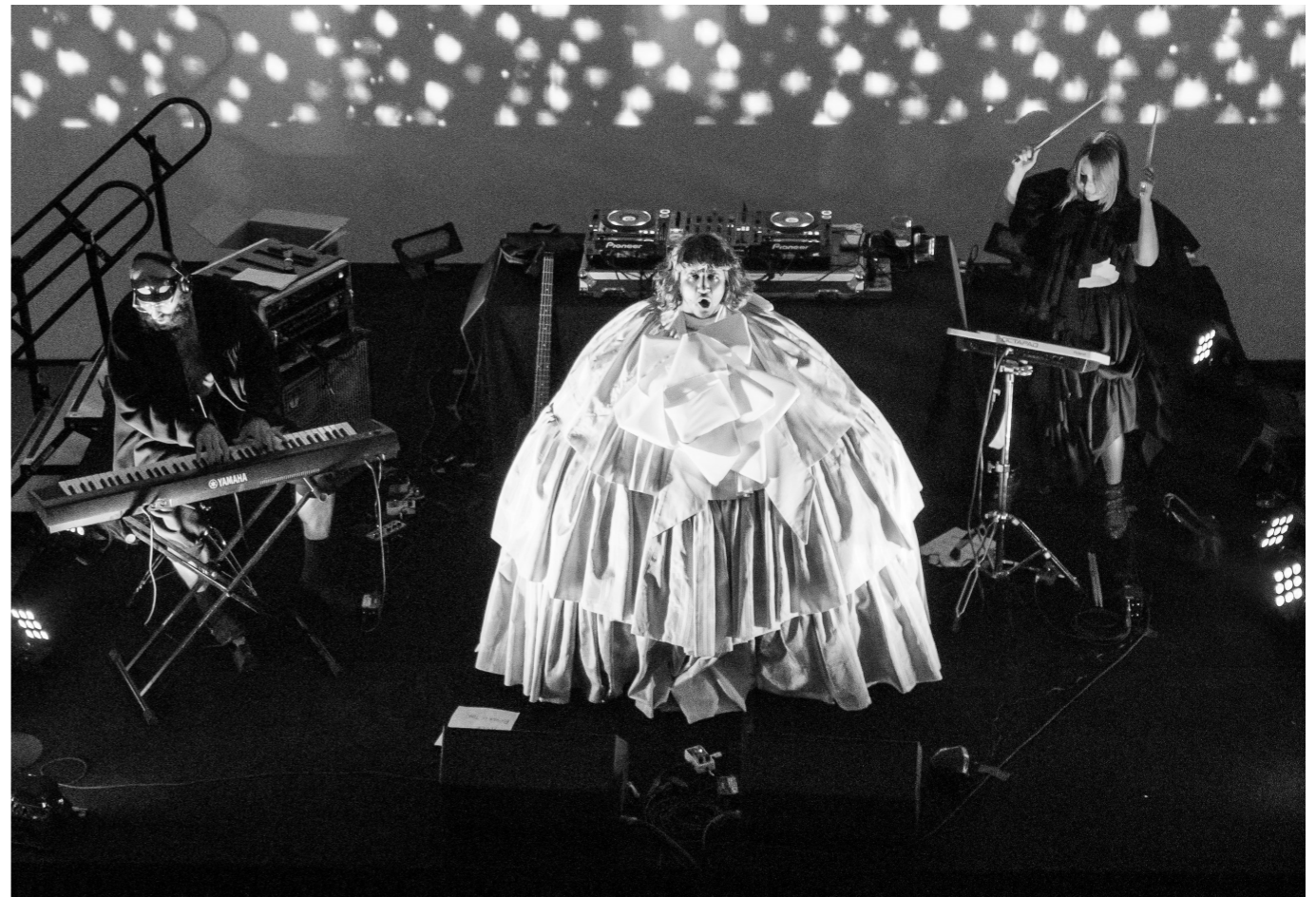
San Francisco gave me the kind of power to just feel like I belonged. The streets became more vital. People were performing on the street, or maybe not even performing but just being themselves. I felt like there, people really had so much personal style. There was so much that you could tell about a person because of the way that they dressed. In San Francisco, people express themselves through fashion and self-expression.

I've always believed in that route as a way to allow yourself to become the person that you want to be. Be brave about it. If there isn't a place to do something, find it in the street itself.

CM: People were making culture for each other, and supporting each other in the process. It's interesting to look back at that period. Here we are sharing our memories of a time and place, and this show is about memory—or resisting the trope of how memories are installed or activated by popular culture. I'd love to hear more about how you approach memory in your work.

RDN: As I'm talking to you, I'm working on the piece for the show. [Sound of beads in the background.] I asked my mom to send me a box of things that I had in San Diego from when I was a child. This box is full of photos of people playing music, my diaries, all of this memorabilia of music and culture itself. I was so embedded in this idea of the performer. Reading some of my diary entries, there's so much dreaming, and I'm like, oh my god, a lot of these things have manifested. The idea of a scene itself allows you to have a place in it, and to become embedded into other people's lives.

So, that community feeling has really generated this idea of a dream coming true. When I think about the way that I make work, it does come from this collage-based idea of putting things together that maybe shouldn't be in the same space. That's what culture does. It allows people to have the mentality to come in and push a bigger, larger idea into trajectory. When I moved to San Francisco, I always wanted to be a musician. I'm not



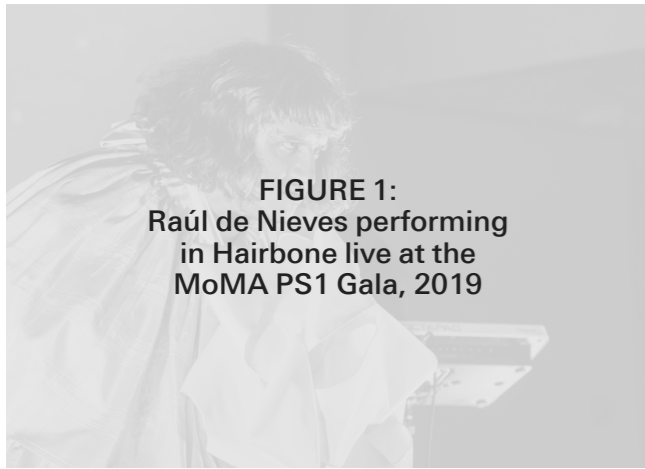


FIGURE 1:
Raúl de Nieves performing
in Hairbone live at the
MoMA PS1 Gala, 2019

the greatest musician myself, but as a performer (Fig. 1, 2), I can command a lot of space. When you are in front of people, you can let go of all of these ways that we hold ourselves back from becoming an actualized person. At that moment, you have the freedom to express yourself in the thirty minutes or hour that you have and it can change the way you see the world around you.

Ever since I started making art, I started realizing that a lot of the things that I have been working with are based around these moments of my life: moments that have allowed me to use these memories

to manifest a new object into the making. This tondo is a space for all of these materials and images that have had so much of an influence on my practice to come together. It literally looks like a topographical map. There are zines, there are newspaper cutouts, there are beads, parts of old clothes, photos of my mom, photos of my friends, ripped-up pages from a diary... and all of it is blended (Fig. 3). It's like a weather map, which highlights where rain or something will happen. This is, in a way, what I'm trying to generate with this work. It's like what happens when chaos really creates form.

Almost all of these lines are coming into this image, and I'm trying to utilize this connection through the material of the bead itself, connecting all of these things. I'm also thinking of it as a form of bacteria taking over the object and just claiming space. It's not about being like, oh, on September 28th, this is what happened. It's more about the way that looking at specific things can trigger somebody else's memory into being like, oh my God, this reminds me of a time in my life when I was using pony beads with my friends, or these flowers recall my prom corsage. The other work in the exhibition, *Who Would We Be Without Our Memories* (2017–2022) is a larger, even more

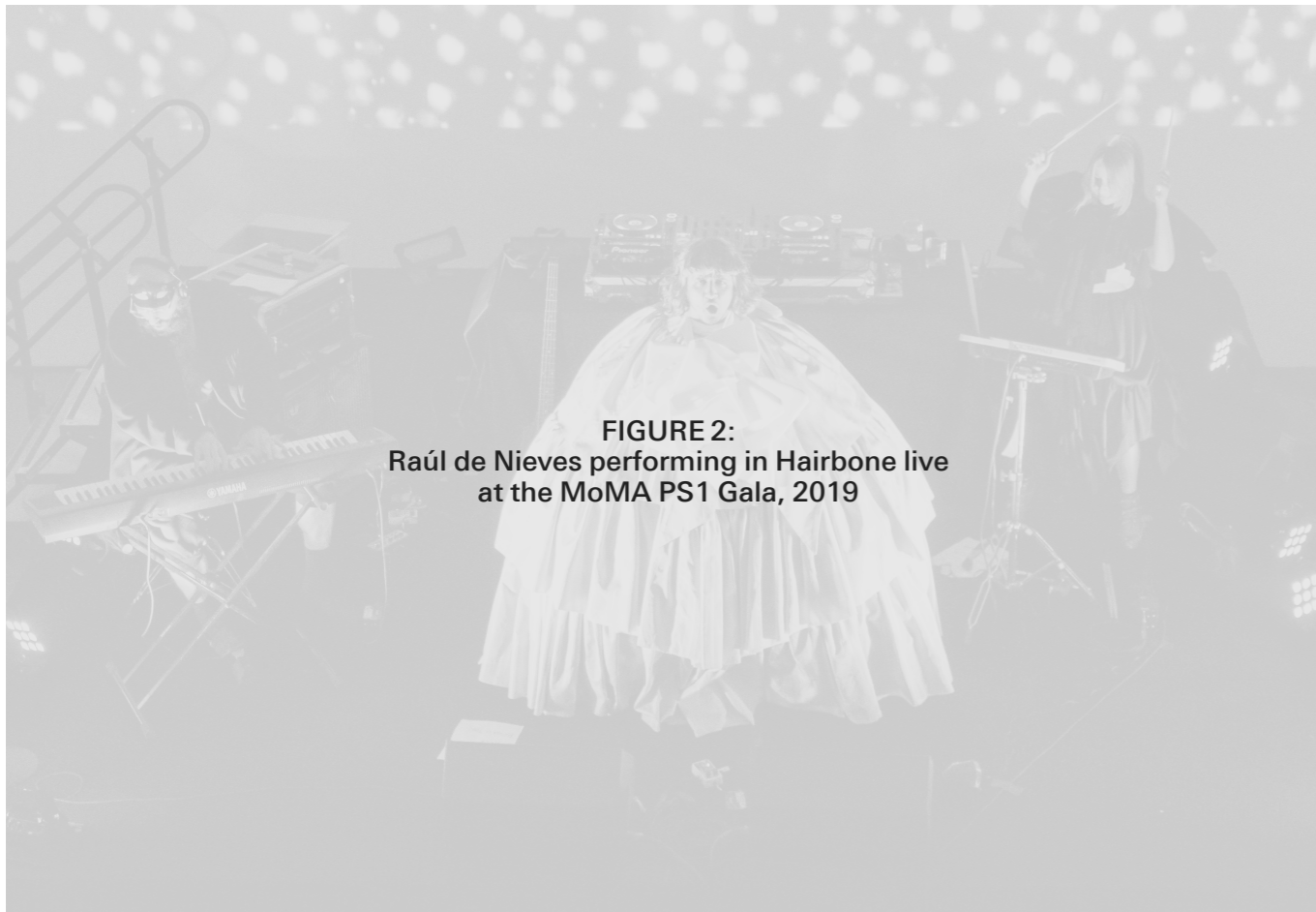


FIGURE 2:
Raúl de Nieves performing in Hairbone live
at the MoMA PS1 Gala, 2019

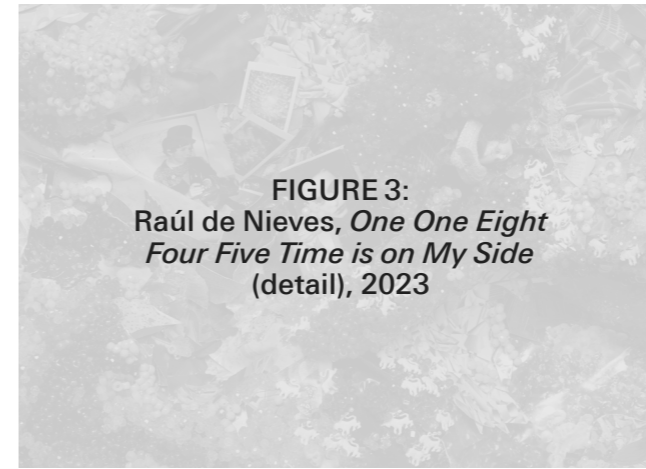


FIGURE 3:
Raúl de Nieves, *One One Eight
Four Five Time is on My Side*
(detail), 2023

complex kind of map of all the times in my life where I've used these artworks to try to convey a story.

I have artwork readily available in my studio to alter as time goes on, which allows a marking of time and space. Every time I look at it, I am reminded of the moment that I started working on it and how a work of art never stops. You're constantly re-working an idea to the point of over-working things. But I think that just proves the ongoing question we're discussing: who would we be without our memories? Some people want to forget their memories, but for others memory allows them to cherish who we are as people. [Memories become] the only things that we can conceptualize into stories, into objects, or into larger ideas. I think about how we share these intimate moments in artmaking, and how the goal is to keep things open so that other people can chime in with their own views and ideas. I find that to be very special.

CM: It sounds like you're creating a sense of intimacy with the viewer, inviting them to recognize themselves in the materials that you're bringing into the frame, and to have a different way of engaging with the present through that recognition. You mentioned that some of the materials that'll be in the new work are keepsakes and mementos, items that your mom held onto. What are you using materially in this new work, and how does that also connect with the way in which you're hoping to engage with the viewer?

RDN: Well, definitely it all starts out by using the form of a circle. The circle itself, to me, is one of the most interesting shapes because it has so many entry points. There are no hard edges. You can just come in. So, there's a circle right now that I've accumulated that includes even the boxes that these mementos were in,

creating these almost mountain-like landscapes. It's old postcards from museums, xerox copies of these zines that I made as a child. There's high school photos of myself, portraits of my mom... deep secrets in little boxes. It's like cut-up T-shirts.

By distorting all of these materials into almost an abstract notion, I think what's created is this topographical sense of looking down —like looking out from the window of an airplane, and seeing the world. There are these geometric-like shapes, but if you really zoom in you realize it's actually homes and people, and all of these things, but your mind is abstracting this very recognizable image as a plane of color and pattern. That's how this work operates—all of these memories creating a form of chaos that has this sense of control about it.

In all of my old diaries, there are these drawings and cutouts from *Circus Magazine* or whatever. Looking at them, I realized that I'm still the same person creating the same collages as I was when I was younger. I even wrote: "One day I dream to move to New York and be an artist." And here we are twenty years later, still playing with the same notions. Manifestation really has become the root of the way that I think about how we allow ourselves to create the world around us. Those dreams that you were dreaming about when you were fifteen until now when they are still the same. Some of them have come true and still others are waiting to come true.

CM: Listening to you describe the materials and how you're coming into making this work, it seems like nostalgia and sentimentality are actually a very helpful and powerful way of thinking about time and connection. Mike Kelley had perhaps a different way of thinking about it. I'd love to hear how you think about nostalgia, where it falls within your work, and your



FIGURE 4:
Raúl de Nieves' shoes saved
from the trash



attention to keeping, reusing, or revisiting objects within the forms that you've described.

RDN: Before I moved from San Francisco, I remember I threw away a pair of very special shoes (Fig. 4). I actually ran back to the trash can to get them. To keep a thing that was meant to be in the trash had so much more power than anything else. Those shoes really did become a vital aspect of how I started creating things, and this relates to the idea of how an object can tell a story. The more you obscure a recognizable thing, and manipulate it, the more power it has to live past its memories.

It's about taking something and distorting it to the point of it becoming a new creation. Growing up in two different parts of the world, Mexico and California, and then moving to New York City, was a form of migration that allowed me to think about the things that were missing in my life: those things that once existed as part of my daily life. In a sense it was a way to try to find those memories within myself. In Mexico every Sunday we would go to the plaza and there would be these folk dancers dressed like old men. It was the most joyful thing.

Moving to San Diego, there was nothing symbolizing any of that until I found this transgressive form of music that had nothing to do with the idea of dressing up as an old man, but which embodied the same openness. I thought, oh, this is something that I believe in, and now can be a part of. Now when I go and see these people they look a certain way. They're creating a whole different form of a memory from the one that I once had, that now is of *this time* and of *this space*—and it gives me the opportunity for self reflection.

Those high heels, seeing that they were about to go into the trash, prompted me to take them out of the trash in order to put hundreds and thousands of beads to restore them, to make them look like an abstraction of coral. Embedded in them is the memory of moving to New York, of going to the punk show and wearing them. I really started to believe that even in telling a story, you're constantly changing the narrative bit by bit so that you can adapt to the person that you are then. In a way, you are erasing aspects of memory, which is maybe indicative of just wanting it to be about that specific thing.

In this work that I'm making, there are all of these intimate things from a time of my life when I felt like a whole different person. There's a lot of sadness in some of those memories, but to see the struggle transformed into an act of hope gives

me a whole new mentality of surpassing the tragic moments of life to create a beautiful path to knowledge and self-appreciation. We self-reflect through things. For example a ring. It just gives you this feeling of starting a new life. Or an old wedding dress that gives you hope toward something that you want. I think that's the beauty of looking into other people's memories; they can really help you understand a new path within yourself.

CM: It seems like you're describing the process of something becoming almost a new signifier, in a way, that speaks to a past event, but that becomes something new within this re-staging. Mike Kelley was interested in that too. One thing with your practice is that you're thinking about those shifts in meaning and the people on the receiving side of it. Not only the people who've been around you in your life, but also the strangers who will come to the exhibition and see the work and what they might bring to it.

I feel like it's very much like how a performer sees the room and reads the room and thinks about space. Can you discuss how performance informs your approach to sculpture?

RDN: I love the idea of performance and objects having a relationship; that in activating these objects the essence of the artist really does live through the work. And I think that when you actually go see some of these exhibitions where they're showcasing the paintbrush of an artist, or whatever it is—the shoe or a towel—you can really embody the person being presented. You start to reflect more onto it as almost like a relic. There's something that carries on within time that really does get embedded into it, and there's a source of energy, because you're giving the viewer the power to know that this thing has been used throughout all of these aspects of your life.

The other map was built from so many different performative elements of my practice. It actually started out as a faux floor that I made for a performance. Now this thing that people walked on for months has become something that you don't even touch. It's funny, because every time the piece was too big for my studio, I would lay it on the floor, and I'd be like, "Walk all over it." And nobody wanted to, but I would allow them to, and I think that just made them feel more connected to the work, because there was the sense of the object itself still retaining a kind of essence from that moment where we were all standing on top of it during the performance.

I feel like when you are using things and letting people know that this thing is activated at times, it really takes on a life of its own. The costume work that I've made, all of it is used in performances and then gets displayed on mannequins. It kind of still has this entity of the self within it. People are waiting for it to be activated. And I think it's up to the viewer to really imagine, or to walk in and actually put it on and make it move.

CM: Your art is sort of seeing who's with you, with the work, and not being precious about things either. At the center is your connection with whoever is standing on the piece or wearing it. There's a liveness to it that I think is quite special.

RDN: Yes.

CM: It might be helpful for you to also talk about your connection to Mike Kelley. What does your inspiration from Mike Kelley look like? How has his work informed your own practice?

RDN: When you think about Mike Kelley, you're like, is he a performer, is he a painter, is he a sculptor, what does he do? He was literally doing as much as he could, and there was this ultimate freedom to his practice. I think that was one of the biggest things that I took from him. There were no limits. So, with anything that he gravitated towards, he created an experience within his own personal practice, and allowed you to enter in. When they had those retrospectives of his, it was incredible to walk from room to room and see all of the different materials that could be utilized into making something. A lot of them are either found objects or things that already had another life, but then he brings them together to create a whole new sense of what the material means.

I think that's where the *Memory Ware* work comes from. It's like he was seeking things that he felt attracted to, and then with his way of putting things together, beautiful things came about. I feel like that changed the way I thought about art. Also, obviously his performance work was so interesting and bizarre, and there were all these scenarios that were just so weird. But I think the weirder they got, the more interesting things became, and meaningful relationships could happen. He would obscure something to the point where you had to make your own decision on what it was about. He's not really telling you what things are about, except for a specific kind of narrative, but even that narrative is so open that then

you start to create your own ideas about the relationship to artmaking. That was one of the aspects of freedom that I feel Kelley gave me.

When I make work now, the way it jumps from material to theme, I do have to think about what the ultimate freedom that we can give ourselves is. Kelley, with his practice, really has given that to a lot of artists. Nothing has ownership. It's all here for the role as an index of inspiration.