

TO TOUCH A STORY: CRISIS AND TEXTUAL TEXTURES IN ARGENTINE QUEER WRITING

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This essay examines two queer literary chapbooks published by art gallery/press Belleza y Felicidad (ByF) in the context of the Argentine 2001 social and economic crisis to show that these texts imagine reading as a performance which entails doing, touching, and being touched back. Through their visual, verbal, and material elements, these works imagine new relations between literature and everyday life and practices in a period in which those practices were dramatically altered. Offering a verbal/visual platform from where to reflect on the deployment of touch and the haptic beyond strictly visual or filmic disciplinary realms, these writings exploit their material dimensions to build specifically literary, historically located “textual textures”. This article argues that textual textures contribute to shed light on how these works resonate with, register, and critically intervene in the crisis context.

The furious banging of pots and pans reverberated across the city deep into the summer night. The television hummed constantly inside while urgent newsflashes monotonously superseded each other. As Buenos Aires prepared for the New Year, masses of people, many of whom had thus far remained cozily sheltered in the comfort of their middle-class homes, took to the streets. Many participated in public protests, some swarmed banks in a failed effort to withdraw their frozen dollar savings as the peso devalued at alarming speed. Police repression, 39 civilian casualties, lootings, and a state of siege precipitated president Fernando De la Rúa’s resignation in December 2001 under the rallying popular cry “*¡qué se vayan todos!*” (away with them all!). The social and economic crisis was the culmination of a decade of neoliberalism (1989-1999) that resulted in 40 % of the country’s population living below the poverty line by 2002, a 15 % unemployment rate, an astronomical foreign debt and the obliteration of national

industries (Grimson and Kessler 2005). The crisis fueled innovative strategies of popular organization and political action, which included unemployed workers' taking control of bankrupt factories, the establishment of local bartering and basic goods exchanges, and the emergence of neighborhood assemblies to address the urgent needs of communities in the face of a collapsing national state. The exploration of new modes of social grassroots politics often functioned alongside a variety of emerging art collectives that actively participated in organizing and sustaining popular resistance.¹

The literary publishing market was deeply impacted by the economic crisis, particularly during its first year: 200 bookstores closed between 2000 and 2001, and production rates dropped 36.4 % in a year. Publishing became prohibitively expensive in the face of the rapid devaluation of the Argentine peso, since the material support of literary texts (paper and ink) was priced in dollars.² In this context, an independent, underground art gallery/literary publishing house, Belleza y Felicidad (ByF, Beauty and Happiness), emerged and thrived. Founded by visual artists and writers Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón in 1999, ByF provided young, unpublished writers the otherwise hard-to-fathom opportunity to informally circulate their work outside the legitimized publishing circuit. Located in the middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood of Almagro, ByF became a purposefully heterogeneous space where experimental literature, visual art installations, inexpensive souvenirs, artists' supplies, and punk and cumbia bands lived side by side.

In this article, I examine queer literary works that emerged out of this climate of artistic experimentation across media immediately prior to, during, and following the 2001 crisis.³ I focus my analysis on two chapbooks published during the initial stages of ByF, Pablo Perez's *El mendigo chupapijas* (*The Cock-sucking Beggar*, 1998-9), and *Tatuada para siempre* (*Tattooed Forever*, 1999), authored by ByF founder Fernanda Laguna under the pseudonym Dalia Rossetti. ByF's precarious texts, published in the form of bundles of photocopies stapled together, include handmade drawings and illustrations. The chapbooks, which typically consist of short stories or poetry, were sold at ByF, as well as at art exhibits and cultural gatherings, for a very low price, sometimes by the authors themselves. They were distributed in small transparent plastic bags with an accompanying decorative object, enacting a productive encounter between

so-called high and popular cultural forms and motifs. The artistic selection criteria of these trinkets is coherent throughout the present ByF editions, which grants them an aesthetic of their own –the objects are always inexpensive golden pendants. Even while I focus here on two ByF chapbooks in order to showcase the specific ways in which the material, the haptic, the visual, and the verbal operate in conjunction, my general reflections and claims about the materiality, trinkets, and visual elements in these two cases extend to the ByF chapbook collection as a whole. Far from collapsing what I consider to be an extended network of distinct, stylistically diverse writers into a coherent, unified ByF group, I am interested in examining the types of textual and contextual resonances and collectivities which these chapbook publications speak of. In this sense, while the building of art collectives, communities, and networks at the time of the crisis has garnered considerable critical attention, in this article I extend this question beyond the field of the visual arts to encompass projects such as ByF which, hinging between the visual and the literary, would profoundly influence the development of subsequent independent Argentine publishing initiatives such as the internationally renowned press Eloísa Cartonera.⁴

ByF chapbooks such as *Tatuada para siempre* (Fig. 1) conceive of reading as a multi-sensory experience. The glossy, slippery texture of the thin plastic bag that covers the text mediates the reader's initial contact with the piece. The act of reading involves a gift-opening performance –as she opens the bag in order to peruse the story, the golden pendant inside falls into her hands. Its unsophisticated, uneven finishing and slightly protruding surfaces bury themselves in the reader's skin. The trinket recalls the type of object she might have played with and treasured as a child, in spite of its limited or nonexistent market value. Offering the reader an object designed to be worn as jewelry, though unable to rise above its cheap imitation status, thus becoming obsolete, the text opens up questions about the productivity of any aspect whose value or purpose lies somewhere in-between the domains of play and use. Subject to the reconfigurations of play, the trinkets appear to cast themselves as performance props, thus imagining reading as a productive, embodied act.

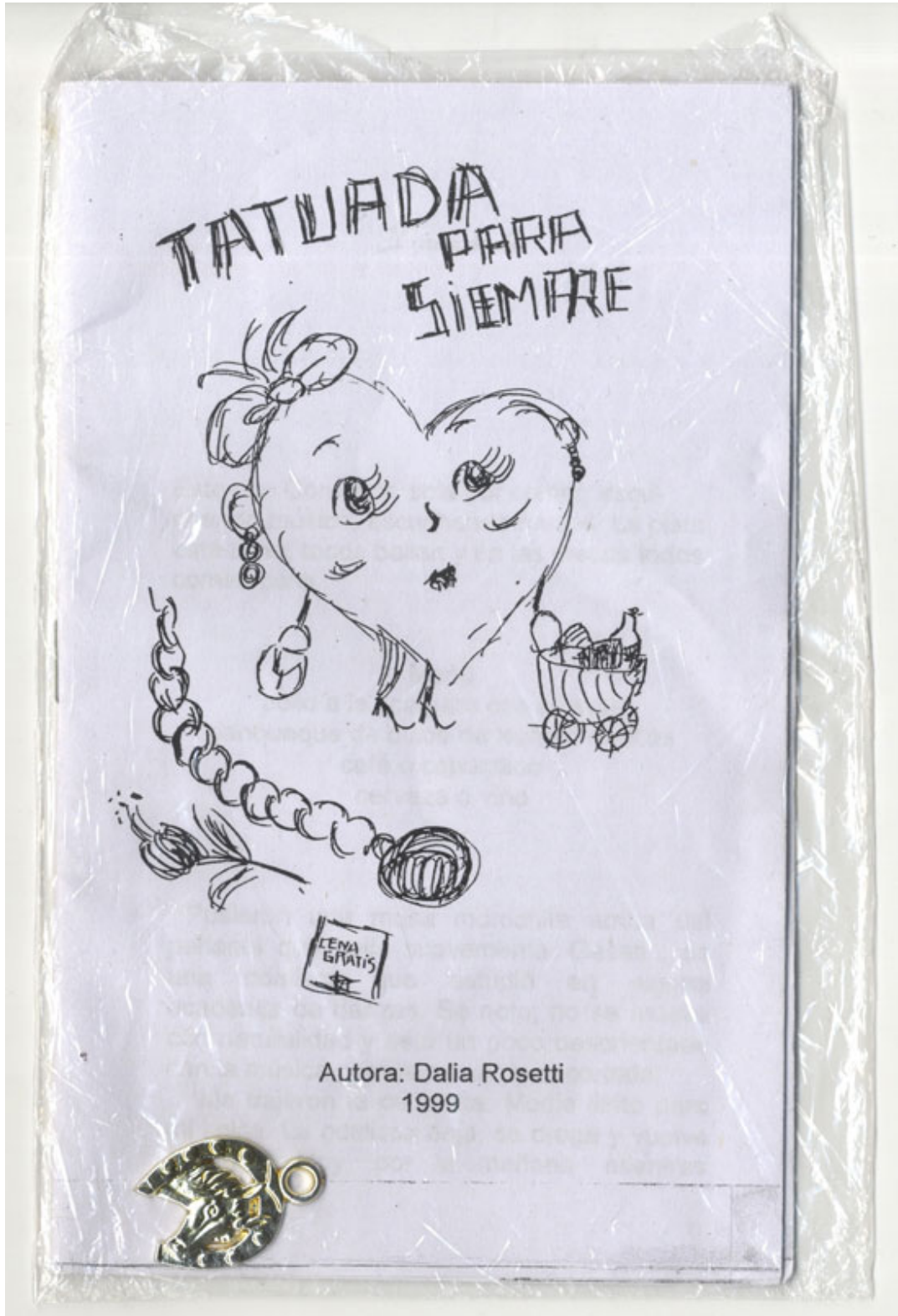


Fig 1. *Tatuada para siempre*, 1999, Dalia Rosetti. Half letter-sized pages folded and stapled at the middle, plastic bag, scotch tape and golden plastic pendant. Drawing by Fernanda Laguna.

The material format of these texts, sometimes distributed in installments, draws both from Brazilian popular “string literature” and the punk practice of DIY (do it yourself) (Pavón 2013, interview by the author). However, and while I will be referring to these works as chapbooks in this article, the format of ByF literature possesses traits of its own which make difficult its smooth classification within a specific tradition. A visual artist, Laguna was part of the cycle of exhibits of Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, and would continue her close relation with several of its referents through the participation and decisive influence of the latter in the initial stages of ByF (Rojas’ curator and key artist Jorge Gumier Maier was, in fact, one of the first to exhibit his visual artwork at ByF). The queer art of El Rojas typically made use of everyday, inexpensive objects, including decorative materials of the type sold wholesale at the commercial Buenos Aires neighborhood Once. ByF publications would incorporate that same kind of decorative, popular objects, visibilizing the filiation of these literatures with the world of the visual arts. Such filiation, however, does not translate into a smooth categorization of these works as art books since, through their stance as photocopies and the generic objects that accompany them, they simultaneously resist becoming cult objects to align themselves with the reproducibility of mass production.

Tatuada’s visuals, produced by Fernanda Laguna, raise further questions about the status of these texts as visual artworks. However, critical analyses of these literatures thus far rely on later, book format editions that failed to incorporate the original drawings and accompanying objects, as well as substantial references to the chapbooks’ format and editing process.⁵ I propose that heeding to these neglected textual aspects is crucial to fully account for these writings’ critical intervention. As literary critic Cecilia Palmeiro has signaled, the subversive impact of ByF publications is to be found not only in their queer content and in a mode of de-professionalization of writing which privileges the building of community over canon construction, but also in their re-invention of the established means of production and circulation of literary texts (2009 171-80). I propose that it is simultaneously through the interaction of their images, materiality, and textuality that these works visibilize and negotiate the aesthetic and political tensions around the re-definition of writing which lies at the core of the ByF project, radically questioning strictly disciplinary understandings of the literary. I argue

that, in the midst of an acute social crisis, these chapbooks imagine reading as a performance which entails doing, touching, and being touched back.

These hybrid works constitute an alternative artistic/literary archive that resists classification within the set frames of media and genre. In this respect, ByF literatures - which I propose might be best accounted for by the term *textos performáticos* (performative texts)⁶ - offer a verbal/visual platform from where to reflect on the deployment of touch and the haptic beyond strictly visual or filmic disciplinary realms. I use the term “performative” to describe literary texts whose insistent attention to material and visual elements produce embodied, participatory modes of reading. These works expand current understandings of touch through a sustained exploitation of the spatial dimensions of literary texts, offering a unique reflection on modes of the haptic enabled by and inscribed within contemporary Latin American queer literatures.⁷ Current discussions in Argentine literary criticism implicitly address the issue of touch through an insistent focus on the related notion of surface. The central role of this concept in emerging Argentine literatures is hinted at by the language critics employ to define them. To qualify the writings of ByF, Palmeiro deploys Josefina Ludmer’s notion of “post-autonomous literatures”. Ludmer crafts the term to describe recent Argentine writing that is clear, transparent, local, self-referential, “pure surface,” and lacks in literary linguistic density and rhetorical devices such as metaphor and paradox. Ludmer claims that post-autonomous texts are proof that literature is losing its specificity as a separate field to become enmeshed in other discourses and practices, such as the internet, the mass media, and what she terms the “real” (2009).⁸ I argue that emerging queer literatures, heavily invested in their material dimensions, problematize the exclusively verbal understanding of the term “surface” in the context of Argentine debates on post-autonomous literatures and, more generally, in the field of recent literary theory.⁹ In the case of Argentine queer literatures, the notion of surface does not only qualify the deployment of clear, transparent, metaphor-less language but simultaneously operates as a crucial material category.

In a context of acute social and economic crisis, ByF texts’ interrogation of reception through the exploration of performance and touch routes key questions about the impact and function of the literary in the world. In this respect, the queer texts published by ByF are less

concerned with representing reality than with re-imagining the relation of literature to the materiality of texts and to everyday practices in a context of imminent social crisis in which those practices were dramatically altered. Through their materiality and visuals, these texts explore the relation of literature to the (reading) bodies and the world around it. Pushing writing outside its boundaries, the chapbooks explore alternative modes of experiencing, attaching to, using, and reading literature. Focusing my analysis on the pole of reception, I propose that, through their re-invention of reading as aligned with performance and touch, ByF chapbooks explore fresh modes of readerly participation. In this respect, I argue that their deployment of forms of texture and the haptic within the literary functions to facilitate their intervention in and register of the 2001 crisis. I offer a reading of these texts as book objects that, through their visuals, materiality, and elements of performance raise a key question at a time of impending social crisis: what does and should writing do in the world?

Textual Textures: ByF Chapbooks and the Haptic

I first came upon a chapbook published by underground publishing house/art gallery Belleza y Felicidad (ByF) three years ago. After interviewing queer author Pablo Pérez¹⁰ one late afternoon, he invited me over to his apartment in Abasto to show me the original edition of the first literary text published by ByF, his novel in installments *El mendigo chupapijas* (Fig. 2). He had used his copy of the novel to edit it for its later publication in *Aventuras*, a 2001 ByF anthology of gay literature: the text was covered with his hand-written revisions. We ran to the corner photocopy shop so that I could take a copy of his text with me, curiously redeploying, more than a decade later, ByF's technical means of publication in order to circulate and give new life to the text. That day, I began to gather bits and pieces of an archive that does not officially exist.¹¹



Fig 2. *El mendigo chupapijas*, 1999, Number 3, Pablo Pérez. Chapbook cover.

During the period that preceded and the years following the crisis, a sense of urgency led cultural workers to rethink the processes of literary writing, (self)editing and publication, consolidating what can be termed an “aesthetics of crisis”. Certain strategies which had emerged in the field of cultural production during the 90s would find in the 2001 crisis fertile ground to develop and thrive.¹² ByF, along with a number of independent presses which had seen the light in the late 90s, flourished during this period and facilitated the emergence of a fresh group of self-managed projects. ByF in particular became a key player in the underground literary world, subversively producing literature that was both financially and, with its flat, direct style, symbolically accessible, though not necessarily any less complex.¹³

These works, through their very materiality, register their enmeshment with precarious modes of craftsmanship, and with frequent editing and spelling mistakes that resulted from the acceleration in their process of production. Markedly vulnerable to wear and tear, and even to losing its constitutive elements (the unattached trinket can – and does - easily fall off the bag, which is held closed by a piece of scotch tape), ByF chapbooks such as *El mendigo* poignantly suffer and showcase the scars of time and even, as I will discuss, their purposeful defacement. The photocopying process has left traces of black lines and blurred stains on the chapbooks. Such traces register the quirks of the particular copy machines used, or perhaps the outline of tiny objects which might have been accidentally reproduced alongside the written pages. The tactile markings which the fragile materiality of these books welcomes generate a version of texture sensitive to the passing of hands and time.

The chapbooks raise the crucial question of how the notions of texture and the haptic, which emerge from the field of the visual, may become central to the reading of contemporary print culture. Laura Marks, working in film studies, derives her definition of the “haptic” from 19th century art historian Alois Riegl’s distinction between haptic and optical images. Whereas optical visibility “sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space...and depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object,” haptic looking “tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture” (Marks 2000 162-3). Eve Sedgwick, building on Renu Bora’s notion of *texture* (with two x’s), elaborates on the affective valences of the latter. Unlike smoothness, which “is both a type of surface and surface’s other,” *texture* “is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being” (2003 14-15).¹⁴ I propose that, through their materiality, visuals, and verbal elements, ByF chapbooks produce specifically literary, “textual textures” which further our understanding of how these works resonate with and critically intervene in the context of the crisis.

In this respect, ByF’s tight link to the world of the market and, within it, to the basic realm of goods and raw materials, contributes to explain why its literature poignantly reflects on its surface the marks of the commercial exchanges in which the press is implicated. While,

on the one hand, ByF's main source of income came from the sale of visual art supplies, the gallery/press simultaneously functioned as a gift shop which sold decorative and everyday objects in the line of the chapbooks' trinkets. The mass-produced, inexpensive trinket that comes with the text and the flimsiness of its Xeroxed pages work to undo the aura of the handmade book invested in its own materiality. The ByF chapbook thus articulates, from its very format, a structural critique that involves not only sexual but also class differences as well as inequalities in the accessibility to material resources, recasting these as key to its aesthetic. Emerging at the end of a neoliberal decade that would lead to a deep social and economic crisis in Argentina, ByF writings think of themselves as to be used rather than dutifully read and re-stacked.¹⁵ In this respect, ByF chapbooks register the material exchanges that take place between the body of the text and that of the reader. Attached to ordinary objects such as trinkets, plastic bags and children's stamps, they imagine new relations between literature and everyday life. These writings can be defined using the term "surface" not only in the sense that they gravitate towards the use of literal and plain language, but also because their simultaneous experimentation with what I term "textual textures" makes it feasible to imagine the haptic as a literary category.

Heart Drawings and Party Souvenirs: Queerness, Ephemera and Performance

Implicitly addressing the question of reception, literary critic Tamara Kamenszain defines the books that emerged out of a number of self-managed publishing projects, including ByF, as objects whose precarious format makes them more akin to "perishable toys" than to intellectual fetishes (2007). Along these lines, I read the ByF chapbook format (Fig. 1) as evoking the local practice of offering small bags with toys and sweets to the guests of children birthday parties, particularly since the visuals in the covers accordingly refer to childhood imaginaries. In this respect, the trinkets that accompany the texts recall the world of quinceañera celebrations.¹⁶ The literary text, in the form of a precarious object/present and framed within the context of a gallery/press which functions as a souvenir shop, entails an understanding of art and literature as deeply grounded in interpersonal affects and exchanges. In fact, physically accessing the work/gift involves an affectively loaded performance which

evokes the practice of receiving a present. The sense of surprise involved in the reception of the book/gift is heightened by the juxtaposition of some of these radically queer texts with visuals that reference the world of childhood. With her party gift bag in hand, the reader is positioned as a child and the text as an object with which she is invited to play. And childhood play involves, precisely, the performance of fictions. Of make-believe, spontaneous, ephemeral narratives and histories.

Much has been said about the possibility that a specific type of performance may exist in and through writing. When discussing the epistemic change that current digital technologies give rise to in performance studies, Diana Taylor reminds us that the question of what we mean by embodiment has become a central debate in the field. Even though performance, as she argues, “has manipulated, extended, and played with embodiment” (2003 4-5) since ancient times, some critics limit performance to present, physical embodiment (Phelan 1993 146). According to this view, writing and performance are, by definition, antithetical notions. Other critics such as Joseph Roach, however, propose an extended, nuanced definition of performance as coterminous with memory and history: “performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silences between them)...” (quoted in Taylor 2003 5). The case of the ByF’s “performative texts” is, however, uniquely complex: their hybrid location in between the visual arts and literature enables the chapbooks to prompt the reader to “use” or “perform” them, physically engaging with them and their accompanying objects. In this sense, these texts are in a privileged position to investigate what writing can *do* rather than exclusively what it means.¹⁷

Tatuada engages the reader in gestures of performance through the enmeshment of its verbal, material, and visual elements. In the story, a radically queer narrator is taken to jail where, after solving a mystery, she unleashes a queer orgy. My copy of *Tatuada* comes with a golden plastic toy in the shape of a piece of jewelry: a horse’s head framed by a horseshoe (Fig. 3). Like Laguna’s drawing of a tattooed bird cage with a heart trapped inside on the chapbook’s back cover (Fig. 4), the decorative objects that come with ByF chapbooks (Fig. 3) have a small circular hole at the top and can be used as pendants.



Fig 3. *Tatuada para siempre*, 1999, Dalia Rosetti. Golden plastic pendant.

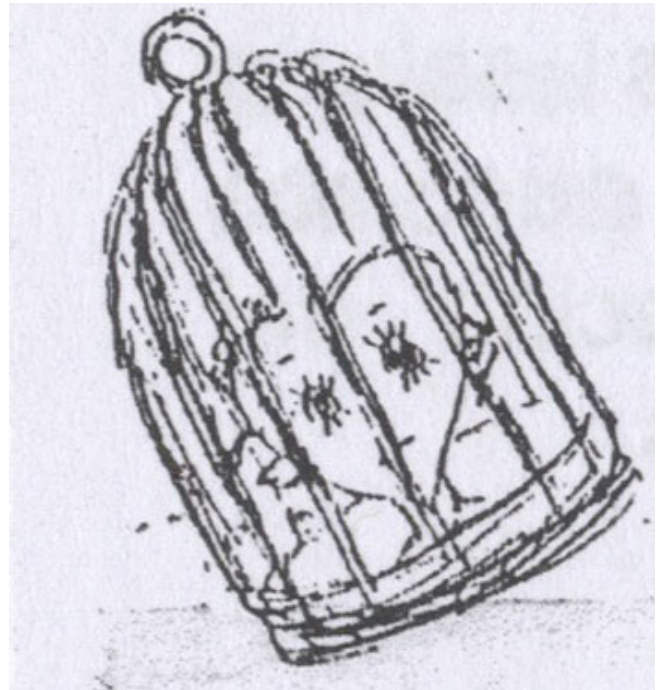


Fig 4. *Tatuada para siempre*, 1999, Dalia Rosetti. Line drawing by Fernanda Laguna.

Though the trinkets that come with the texts are usually golden pendants, other chapbook copies come with trinkets of different shapes, including doves and hearts. While *Tatuada's* narrator finds closure to her time in jail by getting a tattoo of a heart to remind her of her queer experience, the reader is left with a trinket which, resembling a party bag toy, functions as a souvenir of the story. Through this operation, the story becomes translated into the shape of a performative object, an object to be worn or fingered while reading. It becomes tactile. What does it mean, the text seems to ask of its readers, to touch a story? What do we make of a story that touches us back? When does reading become performance?

While the narrator's corny heart tattoo (Fig. 4) forever imprints, as the story's title *Tattooed Forever* suggests, her childishness and naiveté on her skin, the reader is invited to occupy a similarly queer, vulnerable position by wearing the cheap looking, kitschy horse pendant. Tattoo and pendant would rest respectively on the narrator's and the reader's chest. If "by engaging with an object in a haptic way, I come to the surface of my self...losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be possessed" (Marks 2000 184), through the interweaving of the visuals with the trinket, narrator and reader are drawn even closer together as both potentially become queerly vulnerable. Through the visual connection between the trinket, the verbal text and the tattoo drawing, reader and narrator collapse into each other for a moment, making us wonder in whose hands the story rests. Like the pendant, the tattoo functions as an iteration of the story which, imprinted on the narrator's skin, embodies these chapbooks' exploration of affective modes of reading and writing aligned with physical surfaces, performance, and the visual. Reflecting on Renu Bora's understanding of texture, Sedgwick points out that

to perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way and What could I do with it?...To perceive texture is to know or hypothesize whether a thing will be easy or hard, safe or dangerous to grasp, to stack, to fold, to shred, to climb on, to stretch, to slide, to soak. (2003 13-4)

ByF writings suggest that the sustained exploration of textual textures may result in modes of reading closely tied to action and performance.

If the resonance between the drawings and the trinket in *Tatuada* offers partial resolution to the story through materially and physically engaging its readers, *El mendigo* similarly invites the reader to literally color the novel's ending frame. Pablo, the story's protagonist, goes through a series of S/M sexual adventures in fairy tale fashion while searching for his true love. Transformation awaits him at the end of the text in the hands of a beggar whose kiss and touch trigger Pablo's male-to-female transition: he becomes Paula. The last illustration in the final installment of the text is larger in size than the others and includes the instruction *para colorear* (to color) at the bottom of the page (Fig. 5).



Fig 5. Pablo Pérez, *El mendigo chupapijas*, 1999, Number 5. To color.

In it, a formally dressed young boy carries a box with what appears to be a live hare inside. The text not only prompts the reader to behave as a child, but also engages her in the disconcerting, queer practice of playfully coloring a naïve drawing in the face of the text's anti-normative sexual scenes. In *El mendigo*, reading is imagined as aligned with the participatory tradition of children's literature and coloring books: a spatial, embodied practice that directly impacts the text's materiality. The illustration functions to build a notion of reading which involves an ephemeral performance practice: the action of coloring the picture can be performed only once. The text's playful prompt to color the final drawing turns the reader into an informal, amateur producer of art, reminding us from its DIY format that reading is now closer to writing. In these two stories, visuals and trinkets re-imagine the reader's material, embodied relations to literature, inviting her to grant a sense of resolution to the story by participating in queer, affective modes of attachment to undervalued remnants of everyday life.

Such attachment to everyday life is simultaneously materialized through the chapbooks' format which, as I discuss above, evokes that of a party souvenir or keepsake. In fact parties (of a quite different type from hetero-normative wedding and quinceañera celebrations), were a staple of the 1990s generation of writers and artists. For this generation, parties became experimental grounds to experience alternative forms of subjectivity, queer relationality and emerging modes of socializing and community building (Palmeiro 2009). Many of ByF artists and writers, who in turn constituted an important portion of the readership of ByF literary texts, took part in these parties, which renders the chapbook format particularly meaningful.¹⁸

This format positions the literary as inextricably bound to life – the written text is what sparks and simultaneously serves to commemorate ephemeral, communal events, group readings and experiences, shared affects and interpersonal relations. ByF chapbooks' investment in performance is, in this respect, not coincidental. Not only did ByF literary authors often work across disciplinary lines, writers also gave public readings and, in some cases, offered performances of their newly published material.¹⁹ Literary readings/performances were delivered at ByF alongside visual artworks and installation pieces, with which they shared space. Writer Pablo Pérez recalls:

Whenever a chapbook came out we did a presentation at ByF. We read, drank, and smoked. Once, (Washington) Cucurto played [*El mendigo chupapijas's* character] Commissioner Baez wearing a leather harness, and together we read the dialogues of [*El mendigo's*] ... third installment. Upstairs there was an art gallery exhibiting art by young artists, and downstairs a basement, we would sit on cushions on the floor. (2012, interview by the author)

To shed light on the complex relation between performance, ephemera and memory which these chapbooks stage, I would like to revisit José Muñoz's understanding of ephemera as "a modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence" that is "linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself". Muñoz claims that ephemera, interested as it is "in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things," "far from filtering materiality out of cultural studies, reformulates and expands our understandings of materiality" (1996 10). At the same time, ephemera acquires specific valences in the case of queer cultures. Literary critic Ann Cvetkovich points to the centrality of unconventional texts and objects within queer cultures, where they tend to function as alternative modes of register of marginalized histories and affects in the face of the silences and gaps of official archives (2003). Following this line of thought, the ephemerality of the chapbooks, rather than incidental or purely contextual, can be productively read as intricately bound to their queerness. If the precarious flimsiness of these works both resists and bursts open the boundaries of mainstream publishing, editorial, circulation and archival practices, their ephemerality is simultaneously informed by the fact that, as José Muñoz reminds us, queerness

is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere - while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (1996 6)

Muñoz claims that the ephemeral operates as evidence in the case of queer cultures.²⁰ He understands ephemera as a “a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers,” and calls attention to “the efficacy and, indeed, the necessity of such strategies of self-enactment for the minoritarian subject” (1996 10-11). Signaling the fertile intersection of ephemera, queerness, and performance, he further argues that “central to performance scholarship is a queer impulse that intends to discuss an object whose ontology, in its inability to ‘count’ as a proper ‘proof’, is profoundly queer”. Muñoz thus espouses a “belief in the performative as an intellectual and discursive occasion for a queer worldmaking project” (1996 6).

The ephemeral ByF chapbooks, with their precarious materiality and inexpensive trinkets, operate as an informal, queer register, a linguistic translation of affective and aesthetic worlds. These works attach other forms of social value to the literary, since to own them means to be part of an intimate network. It is in this sense that these publications become auratic: as objects of memory, their value is determined not only on the basis of their intrinsic qualities but also through their reference and proximity to past, irrecoverable events. Artist Roberto Jacoby insightfully describes the specificity of ByF, engaged in a critique of the present through a particular conception of the production, reception and circulation of art at an urgent moment of deep social transformation:

What is quite difficult to convey [...] is the importance of communities and of affect to those experiences and those modes of producing, of inventing. The characteristics are there, as you accurately noticed the books were made out of photocopies. That is a kind of scent that is left and that speaks to the nature of those relationships. To why somebody would want to publish *unos papelitos de nada*, some loose pieces of paper [...]. All that love, the love in the little presents inside the books, in the small toys they would find in Once, in the way in which they prepared meetings over tea or something else. There were meetings [at ByF] all the time, meetings about exhibits, talks, dances they would organize, future plans. [ByF] was like a huge cultural center with a practically

nonexistent budget. The meetings worked because they were not programmed, and that was what some people needed. (2014, interview by the author)

Even if ByF did not imagine itself nor functioned as a structured, politically-oriented art collective, it became a space sustained by the active collaboration among writers, artists, musicians, and performers and driven forward by the affective, interpersonal bonds between them.²¹ Far from stand-alone pieces, ByF chapbooks emerge as part of a climate of intense investigation of sociability networks spawned by the crisis and, as such, they bear on their surface the traces both of the everyday lived material realities of the crisis and of the impromptu experimental queer communities that emerged in and from that context. If the chapbooks raise the question of what literature can and should *do* in the world, that exploration resonates with and is part of ByF's investment in, borrowing from Muñoz's terms, a "queer worldmaking project" grounded on ephemera, performance, touch and textual textures, affective communal histories, and the formation of queer networks through and around literary writing, reading, and publishing.

The chapbooks' investment in investigating queer communities is, furthermore, manifested in the very stories they tell. Playfully imagining how queer experiences might become shaped and transformed by the crisis, the plots of the works I examine explicitly explore the tight entanglement of sexual difference and social class. Pablo, *El mendigo's* protagonist, goes through a series of sadomasochistic sexual adventures in fairy tale fashion while searching for his true love. He loses his home when his aunt kicks him out after she learns of his sexual preferences, and thus finds himself roaming the streets of Buenos Aires. As Palmeiro signals, Pablo's journey echoes the lived trajectory of many middle and low-middle class families in Argentina, who lost their jobs and homes at the time of the crisis (2009). Transformation awaits Pablo at the end of the text in the hands of a beggar whose kiss and touch trigger Pablo's male-to-female transition. In the sexually radical *Tatuada para siempre*, the young female narrator goes out by herself to have dinner. When the check comes, she realizes the gift certificate with which she had planned to pay has expired. As she has no money, she is taken to jail, where she solves a long-standing mystery that had caused a rift between the prisoners in order to persuade the latter not to rape her. She then willingly engages in S/M

practices with the inmates, literally and symbolically becoming part of their queer community, and decides to get a tattoo of a heart to remind her of her experiences. In these two stories, being jobless and moneyless lead the protagonists respectively to the streets and to jail. The financial and social precarity which dictates their adventures thus enters into dialogue with the lived reality of the crisis. However, far from a realist, straightforward narrative of the hardships the characters navigate, these works explore the complex ways in which dire moments of social and financial chaos might spawn alternative modes of collectivity and (queer) relationality. In other words, they investigate the ripe spaces of potentiality that periods of crisis might inaugurate.

An Accidental Poetics: The Texture of Mistakes

In order to further address how understanding the haptic as a literary category might contribute to illuminate these works' engagement with and registering of the crisis context, I conclude this reflection by performing a reading of *Tatuada* that shows that notions of texture are not only present in the concrete material and visual elements of these texts but are also inscribed within the verbal itself. The privileging of action to reflection, and the concomitant emergence of mistakes and the unpredictable, is an undercurrent throughout the project of ByF. Cecilia Pavón comments that, at ByF, what was written in the morning was published that same afternoon (2013, interview by the author). In the midst of the 2001 acute social and political crisis, and vis a vis a virtually absent state, it became imperative to attend to pressing social needs by proposing emergency and impromptu solutions which left little time for lengthy contemplation.²² In this context, acting before thinking, doing before desiring, publishing before writing,²³ ByF texts suggest, can become tools for responding to oppressive political, economic, and institutional systems.

If these literatures often incorporate errors and incoherence within their narrative progression,²⁴ I stay close to the original chapbook version of *Tatuada* to show that mistakes and the accidental can also become productive at the time of reading. Misspellings are common in the published literature of ByF, and have been associated with the quick publication and the sense of immediacy and everyday-ness that characterizes these texts. In the story, the

prisoners present themselves in the manner of a sphinx, and as such pose an arbitrary riddle to the narrator and allow her to ask three questions in order to define her fate. She arrives to her interpretation by chance rather than by design: the inspired solution emerges by looking closely at an everyday object that had escaped the inmates' attention: the *grabadorsito* (small cassette player). The sense of the accidental is further attached to the object through the spelling mistake in the written word (the correct spelling in Spanish is *grabadorcito*).

The misspelled word *grabadorsito* functions to signal the term's entanglement with the mistake which, in turn, calls attention to the accidental nature of the narrator's reading – a reading that centers, precisely, on the *grabadorsito*. Misspelled, the word visually stands out within the flow of correctly spelled words, slowing us down. The literal, visual bumps that the misspelled letter S draws on the page contribute to create a granulated textual surface that shifts our reading pace. The word “cassette player” catches our attention just like the material cassette player had caught the narrator's eye in the story, providing the solution to the mystery. Turning our focus to the cassette player, the text urges us to reflect on the narrator's reading scene, as well as on our own (visual) reading of the story.

Sedgwick defines texture as comprising an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure (Sedgwick 2003 15). In this sense, *Tatuada's* misspelled *grabadorsito*, along with the other spelling mistakes in the text, generate a specifically textual texture. In other words, the accidental nature of the mistake, which exempts it from becoming subsumed within a coherent pattern, shape or structure within the text, enables the emergence of a sense of literary texture. If, as Laura Marks suggests, texture involves not only touch but also other senses, the visual bumps which spelling mistakes create in the reading flow produce a sense of spatiality, and, crucially, enable a haptic, visual engagement with the verbal. The narrator's accidental misspellings in the text thus create a textual tex(x)ture which, operating at the level of haptic visuality, speaks of the history of how this writing came into being at an urgent moment in Argentine history.

The mistake and the accidental, along with these chapbooks' materiality, visuality, and performance elements, enable the emergence of affective and historically located textual

textures that call for the expansion of current understandings of surface, touch and the haptic. Argentine print culture's consistent exploration of the physical and visual dimensions of writing showcases the aesthetic and political productivity of literary textures which register, enter into dialogue with, and intervene in the crisis context. At a time of acute economic and social crisis that led to the interrogation of the status of the professional writer and of political representation mechanisms, ByF chapbooks explore literature's involvement in the material world around it by conceiving reading as participatory action. If in and through their own ephemerality these writings evoke ephemeral connections and networks, materially and symbolically encoding affective and creative worlds, they simultaneously investigate what literature *does*, rather than what it means, through imagining an active reader who is also a producer, a performer. Invited down a path of unknowing, the reader might become an artist, a child, an actor, even if only for a moment. After all, in Fernanda Laguna's own words, "when you play you can't be outside the game. You have to be right in the middle of it" (2013, interview by the author).

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Notes

¹ For a thorough analysis of the intersection of art and politics during this period, see Giunta (2009).

² After the first year of crisis, however, the devaluation of the national currency enabled the emergence of new ventures. Publishing houses such as Interzona, Mansalva, and a host of medium and small sized projects that specialized in Argentine literature and essays began to populate the national landscape (unlike 1990s artisanal publishing projects, these took the shape of more traditional presses) (Palmeiro 2011 197).

³ I employ the term “queer” broadly to refer to sexualities, affects, desires, and practices which resist to align with the hetero and homonormative models that govern liberal identities. Throughout this essay, I think through some of the ways in which queerness becomes articulated through materiality, performance, and the visual in the texts I examine. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the term “queer” was imported to Argentina in the 1990s “as a theoretical and critical perspective as well as an activist platform, in a local reformulation.” The Queer Studies Area of the University of Buenos Aires, founded in 1997, set out to “continue the tradition interrupted by the dictatorship, and devised by [Néstor] Perlongher at the beginning of the 70s, of articulating class struggles with gender and sexuality struggles as part of a countercultural movement which would oppose all forms of exploitation, exclusion, repression and discrimination” (Palmeiro 194). In this article I heed to this local configuration of queerness as a key element in the articulation of structural or systemic modes of critique, since it becomes central to think through both the materiality and the symbolic dimension of the works I study.

⁴ The socially committed publishing initiative Eloísa Cartonera produced handmade books with colorful cardboard covers. Co-founded in 2003 by visual artist Javier Barilaro, writer/editor Washington Cucurto, and Fernanda Laguna herself, Eloísa Cartonera provided sustenance to jobless waste pickers (*cartoneros*) by buying their cardboard and by training and hiring them to bind books and run their small-scale printing press. Though with different social investments, Eloísa would continue the project of ByF by publishing texts authored by the same core group of Argentine writers while broadening its scope to include other marginal South American writers. Eloísa’s model would become an inspiration to alternative presses throughout the Americas, enabling the emergence of numerous *cartonera* initiatives in subsequent years.

⁵ Although ByF ultimately closed its doors in 2007, while it was still open many of its texts and

authors were already being published in traditional book form by small scale, independently run presses such as Interzona and Mansalva.

⁶ Along these lines, for the notion of contemporary texts as installations see Wander Melo Miranda 2014, quoted in Garramuño 2013.

⁷ Contemporary Latin American literatures constitute particularly fertile ground for the study of alternative configurations of touch, the haptic and performance across disciplinary and media boundaries. Current academic discussions on artistic autonomy and heteronomy, spurred by the 2001 crisis and the re-assessment of art's political role, give account of the increasing interpenetration of the verbal, the material and the visual in contemporary Latin American art and literature through the coinage of concepts such as “dis-belonging” to describe the recent proliferation of works that move across media and disciplinary boundaries (Garramuño 2013 245-257). Garramuño claims that, after the disillusionment with economic modernization and, more broadly, with modernity experienced by Argentine culture since the 1960s, the category of the literary subject is radically transformed. In her words, “[the emerging] type of presence [of the subject within literature] is linked to touch and closeness rather than to knowledge or representation” (Garramuño 2009, my translation). All subsequent translations from Spanish into English were performed by the author of this text.

⁸ In this line, Tamara Kamenzain refers to the writing of Eloísa Cartonera's founder Washington Cucurto and poets Martín Gambarotta and Roberta Iannamico as forms of “testimony without metaphor” (2007).

⁹ Contemporary Argentine ByF queer writings provide a fresh vantage point from where to examine U.S. understandings of “surface reading” and writing. U.S. queer literary critics Eve Sedgwick and Heather Love, among others, have questioned traditional literary methodologies informed by paranoid or symptomatic reading, defined as “an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses” and that seeks, in Fredric Jameson's words, “a latent meaning behind a manifest one” (quoted in Marcus and Best 2009, 3). As an alternative to paranoid modes of interpretation, critics are currently discussing and practicing modes of ‘surface reading,’ a literary methodology that consists of reading texts on the material, literal or descriptive level.

¹⁰ Pablo Pérez is a young writer who became well-known in cultural circles in the 1990s for being among the first in Argentina to chronicle his fight with HIV in his 1998 literary diary *Un año sin amor. Diario del Sida*.

¹¹ ByF original chapbooks have not as yet been collected by official local libraries or archival

institutions (unlike handmade books published by Eloísa Cartonera, which have for instance made their way to the University of Texas at Austin's Benson Latin American library, among many other international institutions). Loose numbers occasionally become available at the small independent bookstore/publishing house Mansalva, which recently edited a complete collection of the ByF chapbooks.

¹² A group of writers known as the "poets of the 90s", of which Laguna and Pavón formed part, introduced throughout that decade alternative modes of publishing and circulating contemporary literature. In this way, the relation between "poetry as the privileged genre of the mid-90s and the multiplication of self-managed publishing projects" precedes the turn to the novel, and to a professionalized publishing world, of which several of these authors (including Laguna) would be part during the 2000s (Palmeiro 2009 176).

¹³ Certain characteristics of the "poets of the 90s"'s writing, such as (self)referentiality and the deployment of plain, colloquial and literal language, would be taken up and developed in a significant cluster of ByF writings.

¹⁴ On the other hand, Sedgwick speaks of a type of texture (with one x) that "defiantly or even invisibly blocks or refuses such information; there is texture, usually glossy if not positively tacky, that insists instead on the polarity between substance and surface, texture that signifies the willed erasure of its history" (Sedgwick 2003 14-5).

¹⁵ Literary critic Tamara Kamenzain discusses the centrality of the notion of "use" in the poetry of writer and Eloísa Cartonera founder Washington Cucurto, where it is deployed to give new life to everyday objects through freeing them from the constraints of literary rhetoric. Drawing attention to the role of affect and attachment in this poetry, she speculates that it is through "knowing less about the object and loving it more" that the dimension of "use", and the object itself, are rendered present (2007). Building on Kamenzain's linguistic arguments, I turn my attention to ByF's chapbooks in order to investigate how the notion of use functions in relation to the materiality and visibility of the literary.

¹⁶ The trinkets that come with the texts are often found at *quinceañera* (girl's fifteenth) birthday parties, a traditional rite of passage in which a fifteen year-old girl is symbolically initiated into womanhood. At the party, single women gather around the birthday cake to pick one among many silk ribbons that hang from it. Each person then pulls hers out to uncover the small golden trinket of the type that come with ByF texts. A lucky girl gets the wedding ring.

¹⁷ As a modality of inquiry, performance studies can, in fact, offer crucial critical insights in terms of the location of what I term “performative texts” within cultural studies. As Jose Muñoz reminds us, “performance studies can surpass the play of interpretation and the limits of epistemology and open new ground by focusing on what acts and objects do in a social matrix rather than what they might possibly mean” (1996 12).

¹⁸ Parties were similarly integral to the related lineage of 1980s queer performers, artists and writers in Argentina. Following the return to democracy in 1986, parties became a way to rebuild and recreate the social fabric (Garrote 2013).

¹⁹ In fact, the key role of performance and spontaneous action as enablers of heteronomous explorations is at the core of Fernanda Laguna’s definition of ByF as a *space* where people “acted at certain moments and carried out similar projects” and which generated “a style of doing and living.” She elaborates that, in her view, “a space is like a theatre where one performs in a specific way” (2013, interview by the author). If the space of ByF can be imagined as a theatre, many of the artists that participated in the project chose to change their names as they took on, embodied and acted out different roles as writers, performers, musicians or visual artists (Fernanda Laguna/Dalia Rossetti, Gabriela Bejerman/Lirio Violetsky/Gaby Bex, Santiago Vega/Washington Cucurto, etc.). Fernanda Laguna imagines the cultivation of a queer style of writing in ByF as a form of play – in the multiple senses of the word. In the context of the art gallery/press, *performing as* allowed for experimentation across media and for the adoption of ludic, amateur approaches to writing, which in turn functioned alongside the precariousness of its DIY style publications to interrogate the model of the professional writer – a model in acute crisis at the time.

²⁰ And, “because the archives of queerness are makeshift and randomly organized, due to the restraints historically shackled upon minoritarian cultural workers...the evidentiary authority of queer inquiry” is often questioned or altogether ignored. Muñoz further argues that “work that attempts to index the anecdotal, the performative, or ... the ephemeral ... is often undermined by the academy’s officiating structures” (1996 7). In this respect, the limited critical attention granted to ByF chapbooks thus far might respond, precisely, to that pattern of frequent dismissal of ephemeral queer works on the part of academia – a pattern which functions to obscure the centrality of these works within contemporary Argentine literature and culture.

²¹ Interestingly, many ByF artists, writers and literary works have often been dismissed as frivolous, superficial, and socially and politically uncommitted. As a result of these

preconceptions, these writers' filiation with more directly political events and art collectives, as well as their own socially motivated projects, have often gone unnoticed. A quick assessment of Fernanda Laguna's work reveals her founding role in the independent press 'Eloísa Cartonera,' ByF's engagement in Taller Popular de Serigrafía (Popular Serigraphy Workshop)'s socially committed activities, and the 2003 establishment of a ByF branch/art school in shantytown 'Villa Fiorito' where artists offer free workshops for underprivileged children and youth. Moving beyond binary approaches to scholarly reflection, I am, furthermore, interested in considering the ways in which these writings enact alternative modes of queer politics.

²² As Giunta points out, there was a particular perception of time during the crisis. Many experienced the imperative of "doing something now" and "acting wherever possible" (2009 16).

²³ The notion of "*primero publicar, después escribir*" ("first publish, then write") is a famous precept by Argentine writer Osvaldo Lamborghini – a precept which, Kamenzsain proposes, a younger generation of writers partly incorporated into their practices (2007).

²⁴ A friend of the project of ByF, writer César Aira famously proposes a narrative "flight forward in order to cover up the mistake, the badly done" (Flores 2009 454).