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How to Compose a Landscape: Reflections on Procedure in César Aira's *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*

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ABSTRACT: In César Aira's short novel, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, the narrator describes the work and travels of German landscape painter, Johann Moritz Rugendas, in the Argentinian countryside. Rugendas, a landscape painter inspired by the work of naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt, commits himself to a strict procedure that attempts to document not only the variety of organisms in a given landscape, but also their relationship to one another. Rugendas and his fellow painter, Robert Krause, practice the Humboldtian procedure while reflecting upon and discussing matters related to artistic representation and composition. Those conversations also reflect the perspective of a contemporary Argentinian novelist, who also happens to obsess over the procedures and tools that define the work of art, and writing. While the novel begins as a biographical account of a specific trip Rugendas took to South America, it changes course near the middle when the painter is struck by lightning, twice, and is subsequently violently dragged across the pampas by his frightened horse. At this turning point, Aira's novel, and Rugendas's life, becomes increasing surreal, yet the painter never turns his back on the procedure. *An Episode on the Life of a Landscape* remains a meditation on artistic mediation, drawing attention to the eye and hand of the artist in the act of composition.

KEYWORDS: landscape, contemporary literature, contemporary aesthetics, Latin American fiction, Humboldt

César Aira's novel, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, recounts the South American travels of the 19th century landscape painter, Johann Moritz Rugendas. Despite the novel's initial biographical pretensions, it quickly strays from the "known facts" of Rugendas's life and travels, and we enter a world that feels increasingly surreal and strange—specifically at the point when Rugendas suffers two lightning strikes, and is subsequently dragged, face-first, across the pampas by his frightened horse. Yet, despite the dramatic, fictionalized turn in the text, Aira's novel remains focused on issues of artistic observation, documentation, and representation, and how specific procedures might allow one to capture the complexities of a landscape. Rugendas bases his approach on naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt's, notion of the physiognomy of nature, which emphasizes the role of the observer's vision and ability to perceive the relationships between organisms in a landscape. That awareness of the human eye, mind, and hand in the representation of the natural world presents a paradox that drives the work of Humboldt and Rugendas: the artist's perception and framing of the world demonstrates the inescapability of our own mediation as we interact with and represent the landscape; at the same time, it is through artistic representation—a process that, according to Humboldt, involves selection, condensation, magnification, and repetition—that we might come closer to "apprehend[ing] the world in its totality" (Aira 5).

It bears mentioning from the beginning that Aira writes his novel about Rugendas through the lens of a contemporary writer and critic—one whose prolific body of fiction leans towards the surreal and literary experimentalism, rather than anything we would normally associate with the aesthetics of naturalism. That said, Aira deliberately chooses Rugendas and his mentor, Humboldt, as figures through whom he can explore questions relating to artistic representation and what it means to see art as a set of tools and procedures that mediate our relation with the world. While Aira's novel certainly takes interest in the notion of procedure that arises out of the work of Humboldt and drives the work of Rugendas, it also clearly appropriates the life and work of Rugendas, transforming it into something with contemporary relevance. Aira's portrayal of artistic mediation in the novel—and the ontological and epistemological issues relating to the perception and representation of any "totality"—reflects contemporary critical thought, and resonates, specifically, with the work of Bruno Latour. In *Paris ville invisible*, Latour and photographer Emilie Hermant address many of the questions that interest Aira in *An Episode*, as they travel the streets of Paris in order to investigate whether or not they might find a view that allows them to take in the whole of Paris, at one glance. After trying a few famous spots that boast panoramic views, they ultimately conclude that one can only approach the landscape of Paris through various mediations—like, for instance, a good map. In other words, there's necessarily something between the viewer and the perception of any "whole." As Gerard de Vries writes in his book on

Bruno Latour's work, "To see the whole of Paris at a glance, we need to divert our attention *away* from the city, away from reality, and to look at the map. To take it in all at once, to see it at a glance, to see its structure, Paris first had to become small" (7). In *Paris ville invisible*, and many of his other works that investigate modes of scientific study, Latour draws attention to the maps, tools, and structures we use to document and study the world. In doing so, he points to a certain epistemological naivety that leads us to see those constructs as transparent windows onto the world as it is. Latour, in a sense, draws us back to the artist's hand—that of the mapmaker, the technician, the engineer—in a way that resembles what we see in Aira's novel about the work of Rugendas. Both Aira and Latour train our gaze on the tools and processes that mediate our experience of the world and our documentation of what we observe.

Turning to *An Episode*, Aira's narrator introduces his protagonist, Rugendas, by establishing his aesthetic position, and, more specifically, his approach to the work of landscape painting. We learn that Rugendas does indeed come from a line of "documentary painters," but that his specific vocation as a landscape artist veers from his predecessors' battlefield painting and instead takes inspiration from the procedure established by the well-known naturalist, Alexander Von Humboldt. The narrator describes that procedure as "a kind of artistic geography, an aesthetic understanding of the world, a science of landscape" (5). The narrator's language emphasizes the blending of scientific and aesthetic approaches, suggesting that the procedure requires a multi-faceted gaze. He continues:

> The artistic geographer had to capture the "physiognomy" of the landscape (Humboldt had borrowed this concept from Lavater) by picking out its characteristic "physiognomic" traits, which his scholarly studies in natural science would enable him to recognize. The precise arrangement of physiognomic elements in the picture would speak volumes to the observer's sensibility, conveying information not in the form of isolated features but features systematically interrelated so as to be intuitively grasped: climate, history, customs, economy, race, fauna, flora, rainfall, prevailing winds… (6)

The procedure therefore begins with careful observation and documentation, empirical research that leads to the identification of the physiognomic components of the landscape—a process that requires training in the natural sciences. Yet, as the narrator describes, the artistic geographer seeks to figure out and to represent the relations between the physiognomic traits, taking the procedure beyond the realm of strict empiricism. Seeing the system requires a different kind of vision—an imaginative approach—allowing one to apprehend the interrelation of the particulars, and thus to see a totality. Thus, the artistic geographer blends techniques that enable him or her to document the details of a landscape with scientific precision and those that allow for a more holistic, or ecological, vision.

Humboldt's procedure figures heavily into Aira's novel as a framework through which we can understand Rugendas's landscape painting, and it also introduces the idea of the landscape artist as *bricoleur*. The piecing-together of a landscape, as described by the narrator, implies a kind of *bricolage*, since the observed facts require assemblage in order to compose the landscape. To develop the specifics of that procedure, we can briefly turn to Humboldt's own work, outside of the context of Aira's novel. His famous *Tableau Physique*, which depicts Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador, demonstrates the way a scientist/artist can synthesize collected observations, creating layers of information and representing the interrelatedness of all the components. Humboldt describes the theory behind his visual representation of Chimborazo:

> In this great chain of causes and effects, no single fact can be considered in isolation. […] [W]hile each series of facts must be examined separately in order to recognize a specific law, the study of nature, which is the main problem of general physics, demands the gathering together of all the knowledge dealing with modifications of matter. (*Essay* 79)

When we look at Humboldt's image, we see on one side of the mountain a colorful depiction of vegetation that provides a sense of how that vegetation changes depending on the altitude and atmospheric composition. On the other side, the vegetation is "cut away," in a sense, leaving space for inscriptions that identify species and plant communities, along with their corresponding vegetation zones. On both sides of the central figure of Chimborazo, we find additional information compiled in tables.

As Stephen T. Jackson explains, "In the *Essay*, Humboldt integrated a wide array of disparate measures—not only vegetation composition and form, but temperature, geology, atmospheric pressure, atmospheric chemistry, the blueness of the sky, humidity, agricultural practices—into a single view, showing how they varied systematically with altitude and how they were interlinked" (4). The *Tableau Physique* not only demonstrates Humboldt's procedure, but it also depicts the procedure, in the sense that the assemblage of the parts becomes a visible part of the composition. The massive amount of information he has collected and wishes to communicate with his representation of Chimborazo can only be realized through a complex process of cutting apart, layering, and reconfiguring; combining textual and visual modes of representation; and appending tables on each side of the figure. While that might seem to suggest a heavy-handed approach on the part of the scientist/artist, from a Humboldtian perspective, it reflects the complex processes of the natural world and, above all, the interrelation of the components of the system. A representation that reflects only what we can see through direct empirical observation fails to capture a broader sense of the system.[1] Therefore, while Humboldt's Chimborazo figure in some ways strays from a more naturalistic portrayal

of the landscape, one could also say that the figure portrays a fuller, hyper-naturalistic vision of that landscape because it finds a way to represent the invisible facts of the system through a kind of *bricolage*. Naturalistic representation seems, perhaps paradoxically, to demand the hand of the artist, or explicit mediation. Laura Dassow Walls describes the interplay of science and art in Humboldt's work: "Where science must weigh and measure, abstract and bring away, art can make present to the senses and the imagination the fundamental experience of contemplating nature in its wholeness, generating a similar emotional impact" (9).

In her study of Humboldt's five-part tome, *Cosmos*, Walls also considers Humboldt's poetic style and sees it as a textual version of his Chimborazo figure. She writes, "To accept Humboldt as a poet means to view poetics, as Humboldt did, in the Aristotlian sense as *poiesis*, 'making,' emphasizing the process of making over the finished product" (7). She notes that the subtitle to *Cosmos* is "a sketch," a description that encourages us to see the text in visual terms, and also as a work-in-progress. Like *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, which contains the *Tableau Physique*, *Cosmos* blends a variety of kinds of writing, in addition to visual art. In this way, Humboldt's writing, like his visual representations, represent a kind of *bricolage*, and, as Walls suggests, highlight the process or procedure more than the final result. Thus, despite Humboldt's clear interest in apprehending and representing whole systems through the application of his procedure, there remains an openness and sketch-like quality to his work. The work of *bricolage* leaves space for further tinkering—adding more layers, reassembling—in an effort the gain a more complex understanding of the relations of a system. After all, ecosystems are not static, and an ecological approach, focusing on the interplay of the parts of a system, must have the capacity to adapt.[2]

Turning back to Aira's novel, we can see the way that Rugendas devotes himself to Humboldt's procedure, documenting his travels across Argentina with fellow artist Robert Krause. While Rugendas's thinking diverges from Humboldt's in a few important ways, he faithfully relies on the procedure throughout the novel, even after his devastating injury in the pampas. We can see the procedure in action as the narrator describes Rugendas and Krause riding through various settings early in the novel:

> It should be remembered that the bulk of the work they were doing was preliminary: sketches, notes, jottings. In their papers, drawing and writing were blended; the exploitation of these data in paintings and engravings was reserved for a later stage. Engravings were the key to circulation, and their potentially infinite reproduction had to be considered in detail. The cycle was completed by surrounding the engravings with a text and inserting them into a book. (11)

The procedure described here, in the manner of Humboldt, involves many stages and relies upon the assemblage of various notes and sketches into larger works, thus transforming piecemeal observations and data into a broader picture—a landscape. Furthermore, the work of art, it would seem, does not reside in any one part of the process, but in the process itself. The goal to create an engraving seems especially relevant here, since that particular medium disrupts traditional conceptions of a singular, original artwork, allowing for endless, non-degrading reproduction. To a large degree, the procedure suggests a mechanical process, leading Rugendas to believe, at least in principle, that "genre painting [does] not require talent, since it [is] all a matter of the procedure" (10). At the same time, he has a hard time accounting for the fact that he believes that Krause's "pictures are worthless," despite Krause's mastery of technique (10).

In his short critical book, *On Contemporary Art*, Aira writes about the relationship of art to reproduction in a way that illuminates many of the questions that arise with Rugendas's work. Aira argues, "A work of art has always implicitly contained its own reproduction" (16). In addition to the ways that all artworks leave traces of themselves in the world, which necessarily get repeated or reproduced in other works, the question of reproduction is also literal: "concrete and tangible reproduction has always accompanied the work of art" (16). Aira points to sculpture and photography as reproduction-oriented media, and we could certainly add engraving and print-making to those examples. Rugendas, as noted above, makes at least some of his works with reproduction in mind. Interestingly, though, Aira argues that art is defined by its attempt to "remain one step ahead of the possibility of its reproduction" (18)—a characteristic he first identifies with contemporary art and then suggests applies to art more generally. Of course, Rugendas, far from representing contemporary art, works as a 19th century landscape artist who makes art for reproduction. It seems clear that Rugendas seeks reproducibility, certainly not fleeing from it. Yet, as Aira develops, when we consider art as procedure, the art object exists as a document, resulting from the procedure without capturing or reproducing it. "The painted picture at the end is merely the visible testament to the mad solitary machine that moves around inside artistic activity" (24). The engraving, as well as all of the prints made from that engraving, caters to reproduction and results from the strict practice of the procedure, at the same time that it fails to reproduce the *work* of art, or the unfolding of the artwork over time. Moreover, as Héctor Hoyos explains in his analysis of Aira's story, "Duchamp in Mexico," emphasizing process over product "is about foreclosing the possibility of art itself becoming a commodity" (168). While Rugendas makes art with reproduction in mind, Aira's portrayal of the artist and his process makes clear that no print manifests the ongoing work of art. The narrator uses language like "exploitation," "circulation," and "infinite reproduction," pointing to commodification as the end result of Rugendas's work (11); at the same time, the novel implies that the work of reproduction, despite any economic and practical value it might have, stands in contrast to the work of art, which, as a procedure or process, can't be commodified. Per-

haps for this reason, Aira, a contemporary novelist and critic of contemporary art, takes interest in a genre painter like Rugendas: because Rugendas puts procedure above all else, rejecting the identification of art with a single "auratic," or commodified, art object. Aira dedicates his novel to the unfolding of that procedure, presumably, at least on some level, identifying his own ideas about art and literature with the work of Rugendas.

Interestingly, after his accident, Rugendas becomes preoccupied with the book of lithographs that brought him notoriety, *A Picturesque Voyage through Brazil*, specifically reflecting upon the way the book came together during the publication process. He ruminates over the fact that he allowed French journalist, Victor Aimé Huber, to write the text in the book, considering it, at that time, a secondary task. The narrator explains, "He had thought of the text as an accompaniment to the images; but what he had not seen at the time, and was now beginning to realize, was that by considering it an accompaniment or a complement he was separating the text from the 'graphic' content. And the truth, he now saw, was that both were part of the same thing" (51). Rugendas now conceptualizes the book as an assembled work of images and texts, all of which document the procedure, challenging his previous assumption that the writing existed outside the main purpose and artwork of the book. As Brett Levinson clarifies in his discussion of the novel, "Rugendas does not conclude that the *nègre* [Huber] is as much an artist, and thereby as much the author of *A Picturesque Voyage*, as he himself is. He recognizes the contrary: art is mechanical, and hence, no one is a rightful author" (53). Yet, all the same, Rugendas clearly resents Huber's involvement in the book, claiming that he "infiltrated the very essence of the work, under the pretext of carrying out a purely technical task" (51). Therefore, paradoxically, Rugendas seems to assert that all art is procedure, *techne*, at the same time that he feels betrayed by Huber's intrusive participation in *his* book. Rugendas does not feel convinced that Huber's writing plays a "purely technical" role, perhaps because writing largely determines how the pieces fit together and how a story is told—identifying and framing images, making sense of notes, and positing relations between the various documents. Rugendas describes Huber's role as: "making coherent sentences out of the disjointed scraps of oral documentation" (51). The procedure of writing, even at the level of the sentence, implies a certain assemblage of parts, and the construction of a totality from those parts. It parallels what the landscape painter does when representing a system and attempting to demonstrate the relation between its different components.

As he reflects on the role of writing in his book, Rugendas also turns to writing himself, immersing himself in the task of letter writing. According to the narrator, Rugendas's correspondence during this period reflects two main purposes: to maintain contact with family and friends as he routinely did during his travels; and "to clarify things for himself and come to terms with the gravity of the situation" (45). The situation, in this case, refers to the terrible accident that has left him virtually unrecognizable and, it seems, terrifying to behold—given his mangled, ceaselessly twitching face. Rugendas uses writing as a tool to reconfigure his life after the trauma, in a way that parallels the literal way that those who found Rugendas after the accident "washed his face and tried to put it back together, manipulating the pieces with their fingertips" (36). Perhaps in writing, he can narrate and explain his current state—both to himself and to the intended recipients of his letters. He understands such an effort as a "curious impossibility," yet he still engages in the letter writing, trying to account for what took place and to "find a viable way forward" (46, 44). Rugendas sees the letter writing as a matter of documentation, and thus an extension of the procedure that he practices in his artwork. Yet, in writing to his sister, Rugendas becomes aware that each letter can only document his situation in a fragmentary way: "This was one of those situations in which the whole is not enough. Perhaps because there were other 'wholes,' or because the 'whole' made up by the speaker and his personal world rotates like a planet [...]" (46). Thus, Rugendas reaches out to a diverse set of recipients, repeating the linguistic procedure of documenting his state in order to compose a sort of written landscape, where the different letters, if pieced together, compose a broader system.

While Rugendas remains committed to the procedure throughout the novel, he does seem increasingly aware of that which escapes the procedure, or can't be accounted for. The narrator does tell us early in the novel that Rugendas defies Humboldt's advice to travel to regions with abundant vegetation, believing, instead, that "the mysterious emptiness to be found on the endless plains" could lead him "to discover the other side of his art" (5). Rugendas wants to take Humboldt's procedure to its limit and to keep going; he seeks an experience that exceeds the procedure, one that refuses containment and incorporation. In the pampas, Rugendas thinks, something might "finally emerge to defy his pencil and force him to invent a new procedure" (24). But, in order to get to the limit of the procedure, Rugendas rigorously devotes himself to the procedure, inspiring Humboldt's "highest admiration" (6). One of the central questions that arises in the novel is whether or not Rugendas's art, his procedure, changes after his horrific accident. Does this represent the limit—the moment or experience that the procedure cannot account for, and that forces the invention of a new one?[3] We do know that, after he recovers enough to resume his artwork, Rugendas continues to draw according to the procedure, losing "none of his skill" (39). And, by the end of the novel, the narrator insists: "the procedure went on operating through him" (88). In other words, the narrator does not indicate any direct change in approach or procedure—aside from the fact that Rugendas's injuries pose a series of challenges on a practical level, including debilitating migraines, intense nerve pain, sensitivity to light, and dependence on narcotics. Yet, I would argue that the novel's depiction of the procedure—and Rugendas's enactment of it—shifts, emphasizing the play involved in the artistic process and in the act of composing a landscape or scene. The scientific/artistic process of documentation by which we can apprehend the various components of an ecosystem and

their relations begins to feel more like a tool of possibility and openness. The technique of the procedure doesn't change, but the narrator draws attention to the complexities of artistic mediation and the way that a seemingly mechanical process provides a space for countless variations and modes of assembly.

After the accident, Rugendas re-engages with the procedure, making it possible to "[recover] a certain degree of normality," as he focuses his attention on the landscapes of San Luis (42). During this time, he notices something about the physiognomic procedure that offers new insight. The narrator explains:

> An artist always learns something from the practice of his art, even in the most constraining circumstances, and in this case Rugendas discovered an aspect of the physiognomic procedure that had so far escaped his notice. Namely that it was based on repetition: fragments were reproduced identically, barely changing their location in the picture. If this was not immediately obvious, not even to the artist, it was because the size of the fragments varied enormously, from a single point to a panoramic view (which could greatly exceed the dimension of the picture). In addition, the fragment's outline could be affected by perspective. (43)

Again, the narrator emphasizes not a change in procedure, but a shift in the way Rugendas perceives the procedure. The recognition of repetition, and, even more, of the difference between repetitions, draws Rugendas's attention to the way the procedure, as a tool, points to the non-correspondence of seemingly like things. Repetition replicates at the same time that it highlights the difference implicit in the "again" or "once more" of the act of repeating. Furthermore, as Rugendas reflects, "the fragments var[y] enormously," depending on size, scope, and perspective. These thoughts eventually lead Rugendas back to Humboldt, whom he describes as having "designed the procedure as a universal knowledge machine" (43). Rugendas, much less interested in generating universals, muses that such a machine "could be dismantled," simply through the faithful practice of the procedure, which necessarily produces non-corresponding repetitions (43). As Levinson points out, such a practice "when crossing an undefined line, generate[s] a new act" (43).

The last third of Aira's novel recounts Rugendas's sketching of a *malón*, as he pursues groups of Indians through the countryside in their conflict with European settlers, and thus fulfills his "cherished dream" of witnessing and documenting such a spectacle (20). As Rugendas and Krause embark on their journey to find the Indians, the narrator emphasizes the aesthetic character of the scene, including the painters, who ride off "as in an illustration" (62). He adds, "The scene was very fluid, very distant, a mere optical play of appearances…" (63). Distance, light, and movement affect the way that objects and actions appear to the artists, providing a multiplicity of perceptions as they begin to observe and document the scene playing out before them. "The scene [is] picturesque in the extreme," which simultaneously inspires "the stick of charcoal […] to fly across the paper" and also makes them aware that the aesthetic qualities of what they are seeing might cause them to compose sketches that stray from realism, feeling idealized or contrived (65). "Sketching naturally" and "quickly," though, will help them to avoid the pitfall of succumbing to the picturesque and reproducing a set of ideas rather than strictly using the procedure to document the scene (65).

Despite the painters' commitment to faithful documentation, the scenes of the *malón* unfold before them "much more like pictures than reality," as if, instead of just happening, the scenes were, Rugendas thinks, invented or artistically composed—with the purpose of evoking "strangeness, incoherence and madness" (71). In other words, even when using the procedure and "sketching naturally," Rugendas and Krause find themselves immersed in a situation that feels like an artistic performance, at a remove from a sort of unmediated reality that they could theoretically document. As Levinson writes, Rugendas "paints an indigenous world that seems to have arrived on the scene as, precisely, a scene, a *tableau vivant*. The Indians appear to appear, as models do, for the express purpose of being reproduced" (65). The performative aspect of the situation—especially when one indigenous man carries a salmon on his horse, pretending to carry away a captive—draws attention to the inescapability of artistic mediation, and, in this case, the history of Western ideas about and representation of indigenous peoples. Sandra Contreras, in her book *Las vueltas de César Aira*, provides insight into the cycle of Airan novels that explore Western depictions of indigenous peoples in the pampas. She argues that Aira puts to use, and then deconstructs, Western travel narratives in the "New World."[4] For the purposes of this paper, though, we can conclude from these scenes that art precedes and conditions the artistic efforts of Rugendas and Krause; the *malón*, as a repetition of past *malóns*, reproduces a set of ideas and characters, and the Indians take the reproduction to the point of absurdity, where it breaks down and highlights its own artifice.

Regardless of the performativity of the scene, Rugendas remains committed to documenting the confrontation, feverishly sketching as more and more Indians appear. The narrator explains, "As is often the case with collectors, the problem was not a lack but an excess of specimens" (66). Again, the narrator describes Rugendas's work in terms that emphasize the accumulation of objects and implies that perhaps the most difficult part of the task—whether in the act of sketching or later acts of composition—involves sorting through and choosing objects to reproduce from the "excess of specimens." As Rugendas manages to get himself closer to the action in order to sketch the specifics of the figures and their movements, he begins to reflect on the work to come:

> Everything sketched in this explosive present was material for future compositions, but although it was all

> provisional, a constraint came into play. It was as if each volume captured in two dimensions on the paper would have to be joined up with the others, in the calm of the studio, edge to edge, like a puzzle, without leaving any gaps. (67)

The process of composition here, and its goal, recalls Humboldt's Chimborazo figure, where we can see a puzzling together of different pieces—pieces that need individually to communicate a kind of "volume" of their own, at the same time that they combine fluidly with other volumes that portray different kinds of information from different perspectives. One must capture, perhaps paradoxically, multiplicity in a unified composition. And that composition, though gap-less, will have edges and seams, pointing to the procedure as *bricolage*. Rugendas becomes increasingly aware of the multiplicity and plurality inherent to the procedure: "Rugendas found himself making pluralist sketches. But wasn't that what he always did?" (69). Thus, Rugendas does what he has always done; yet, sketching the *malón* has come to redefine the procedure. Inventing a new procedure—if that is what the near-death, limit-experience of the accident indeed provokes—more precisely involves a sort of redefinition, re-invention, reproduction. Rugendas practices the procedure as a repetition, or reproduction of itself.

As the two artists create a flurry of sketches, amassing documentary evidence of the scenes they witness, the narrator suggests that their work takes them in a direction where the work, in some sense, gets out of the way, allowing the world itself to appear.

> Over the course of the day, there was a progression—though it remained incomplete—towards unmediated knowledge. It is important to remember that their point of departure was a particularly laborious kind of mediation. Humboldt's procedure was, in fact, a system of mediations: physiognomic representation came between the artist and nature. Direct perception was eliminated by definition. And yet, at some point, the mediation had to give way, not so much by breaking down as by building up to the point where it becomes a world of its own, in whose signs it was possible to apprehend the world itself, in its primal nakedness. (77-8)

It seems contradictory that a "system of mediations" can lead the artists towards "unmediated knowledge," but the narrator clarifies that the work doesn't simply come to a magical point where it disappears, allowing the world to come forward, with no mediation. Instead, artistic mediation, as it builds, increasingly distances itself from the world, paradoxically becoming a sign of a "primal nakedness." That understanding of artistic mediation evokes a moment earlier in the text, as Rugendas and Krause leave the foothills of the Andes and ride into the vast, seemingly empty plains. The narrator describes the journey in mythic terms: "A ruse against Orphic disobedience: obliterate all that lies behind. There was no point turning around anymore" (24-5). Rather than trying to call Eurydice forward, in this scenario, Orpheus understands the distance that makes turning around a futile endeavor. And so his art, his song about his wife, becomes an expression of the distance, and a sign of Eurydice in her absolute irretrievability. The narrator's version of this myth provides a means of framing the way that Rugendas sees artistic mediation and uses distance as a tool in his art; paradoxically, his approach appears to open onto something more "primal" than if he were attempting to overcome mediation.

The novel closes with Rugendas observing and sketching a group of indigenous people sitting around a fire, communing after the *malón*. As noted earlier in the paper, by the end, we have decidedly left the realm of historical or biographical fiction. Roughly halfway through the novel, after the narrator discusses Rugendas's prolific letter writing, he admits: "[...] there is no shortage of documentary material for his biographers, and although none of them has tried, it would be perfectly possible to reconstruct his travels day by day, almost hour by hour, following every movement of his spirit, every reaction, every scruple" (45). The narrator, here, does not seem to count himself as one of Rugendas's biographers; and, regardless, he, like them, has little interest in digging through the letters in order to depict with any accuracy what actually took place. Ottmar Ette, in his essay on *An Episode*, refers to the text as "frictional," or playing with the friction between facts and fiction. He notes "nearly imperceptible errors" from the beginning of the novel, where the narrative diverges, minimally but significantly, from known events and dates in Rugendas's life (9). Beyond the question of biographical accuracy, some critics, like Carmen de Mora Valcárcel, focus on what they see as an abrupt shift in style—from realism to something more surreal and sometimes absurd. Mora Valcárcel sees Rugendas's accident as a point of rupture not only for the painter, but for the novel as well (494). Eduardo Thomas Dublé agrees, adding that such a rupture, and the subsequent unfolding of a narrative unbound from historical events and realism, makes space for "the relevance of the 'procedure' in the poetic conception of Aira, which is fundamental to his reinterpretation of the figure and work of Rugendas" (266).[5] In other words, the explicit break from history and biography—to the extent that Aira's novel ever really invests in either—allows Aira to represent Rugendas through the lens of his own contemporary poetics.

As noted earlier, the emphasis on Rugendas's obsession with process and procedure, from the beginning of the novel, links the painter, despite his period, to Aira's writing on contemporary art. And, when considering what Aira has to say about his own writing process, and about writing in general, it becomes clear that the figure of Rugendas—at least, the version of him that Aira invents—communicates ideas about art that transcend the genre of painting. As Aira writes in the essay, "The New Writing," avant-garde artists, including writers, are "inventors of procedures," clarifying later: "what we think of as the 'work' can be the method by which the

work is made, rather than the actual work itself, the work acting as a kind of documentary appendix which serves only as a means of deducing the process from which it arose." Aira consistently comes back to a set of ideas in his critical writing and his fictions, finding different ways to explore his own obsession with procedure and treating the task of writing as a sort of experiment that must be allowed to unfold, without looking back and retracing one's steps. Mario Ballvé writes, "Aira's procedure, which he has elucidated in essays and interviews, is what he calls *el continuou*, or *la huida hacia adelante*. These concepts might be translated in English as 'the continuum,' and a 'constant flight forward.'" Ballvé explains that such a procedure rejects re-writing and editing, as it presents an interruption of the work-in-progress. That stance at least partially explains Aira's prolific publication habits. He remains committed to the idea that a book represents a sort of "documentary appendix" of the actual work of writing, the procedure. Like Rugendas, Aira seemingly flies through notebooks, in a flurry of movement that favors the potentiality of next page over any past pages. As Reinaldo Laddaga puts it, "Aira's texts tend to give the feeling of being barely finished, the works of an impatient craftsman who, in the midst of completing a piece, couldn't wait to start the next one."

Aira's notion of procedure insists upon forward movement, and it also challenges traditional modes of storytelling. After all, Aira, in *An Episode*, chooses the figure of a visual artist, not a writer, to reflect upon questions of artistic process; and, in interviews and essays, he commonly defines himself as an artist who works with words.[6] Early in their journey toward the pampas, Rugendas and Krause actually have a conversation comparing storytelling to visual art, where Rugendas proposes that "were all storytellers to fall silent, nothing would be lost" (26). Yet Rugendas is actually advocating for a different kind of storytelling—storytelling without story, in a sense—rather than suggesting that it come to an end. He posits that stories, including histories, serve a purpose, because they provide an "understanding of how things were made" (25). In other words, stories create cause and effect relationships, and thus satisfying explanations, for the world and our experience in it. Without such stories, "the present generation, or those of the future, could experience the events of the past without needing to be told about them, simply by recombining or yielding to the available facts [...]" (26). From that perspective, the facts of the past co-exist with the present, as documents or traces that can be pieced together in various ways—not as a means of providing an explanatory narrative, but as a means of experiencing the past in the present, without the mediation of an already-made story. In his analysis of Rugendas and Krause's conversation in Aira's novel, Aaron Hillyer points out:

> This new way of relating to the past in the absence of stories about it would restore an ontological fullness to the past, because any past event itself was contingent; it could have been otherwise. To experience the past without being told about it is to cancel the fixed actuality of the past in favor of its potentiality; it is to momentarily disrupt linear time altogether and end the time of the type of story that insists on establishing causal relationships. (47-8)

Thus, even when representing the past, Rugendas promotes a kind of "flight forward," dedicated to the unfolding of the past in the present—an unfolding that can happen again and again in different ways, as a repetition of the past.

Rugendas then clarifies what a different mode of storytelling might look like: "The purpose of storytelling could be better fulfilled by handing down, instead, a set of 'tools,' which would enable mankind to reinvent what had happened in the past, with the innocent spontaneity of action" (26). A "set of tools," or procedure, provides a method or mode for storytelling, without providing the actual story. Storytelling with that purpose can be generative rather than prescriptive, and encourages tellers and writers to see history as a kind of *bricolage*—one that involves tinkering with a set of tools when "recombining or yielding to the available facts" (26). That perspective illuminates what we see taking place in Aira's novel, in the sense that he tells a story about a historical figure that playfully veers from the known events of Rugendas's life. While one can see such a gesture as privileging fiction over historical accuracy, it is also important to consider how the novel challenges the ways we write about the past. Perhaps Rugendas has more than one story. And, regardless, the story itself, as a product of storytelling, remains much less important than the procedure of storytelling, or set of tools, that takes shape in the novel. Such a procedure might generate more stories and refuses to limit itself to the dictates of a single, linear history.

Aside from questions of historical accuracy and how we write the past, Aira appropriates the figure of Rugendas and his work, piecing various events and facts together in ways that communicate with his own contemporary poetics. Rugendas, at times, takes on the persona of a contemporary Argentinian writer of experimental novels, as he rides through the plains seeking an experience that forces the invention of a new procedure. That act of appropriation, or re-contextualization, makes the novel itself a work of *bricolage*. As Mariano García writes in *Degeneraciones textuales*, much of Aira's writing functions as *bricolage* and reflects his obsession with Marcel Duchamp. García notes, "Through the reconstruction of an object with prior materials, ends are transformed into means: signifieds become signifiers and vice versa" (97). That sort of approach points to the radical openness of the work of art and writing, since the *bricoleur*'s toolbox allows for continual re-invention. Aira's novel, and his framing of the work of Rugendas, in its insistence on procedure and *bricolage*, draws attention to artistic mediation, asking us to notice the unfolding of the *work* of art, the piecing together of different components and documents, and the tools that allow us to construct a broader, fuller vision of what we attempt to perceive.

NOTES

[1] Chunglin Kwa, in his study of Humboldt's approach to landscape, draws attention to the naturalist's notion of the "heath," which differs from his 18th century predecessors and demonstrates his insistence upon relational thinking. Rather than a habitat, or the location where one might find a particular species, Humboldt sees the heath as "an association of species," and, therefore, "transforms the heath in a landscape, in the modern, ecological sense" (9).

[2] Some of my reasoning here threatens to blur Humboldt's own thought with contemporary thought about the functioning of ecosystems. Yet, Aira's novel invites such blurring, whether considering aesthetic or ecological thinking. I find Timothy Morton's notion of "ecological thought" particularly relevant here, especially since he discusses the obligation of thinking about "totality" in our modern world, while simultaneously emphasizing radical openness. He writes, "We may need to think bigger than totality itself, if totality means something closed, something we can be sure of, something that remains the same" (5).

[3] Critics differ in their answer to this question. As Levinson points out, Rugendas continues to draw according to the procedure, with no change in skill or approach (Levinson 52). Amanda Holmes, in "Art, Science, and the New World," disagrees, seeing the accident as freeing Rugendas from the limitations and determinism of strict methodology (206).

[4] See Contreras, p.47-8.

[5] Translations from Spanish are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

[6] See interview with María Moreno in *Bomb Magazine*.

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