

## Review

From Los Angeles: Box (a proposition for ten years)

By A. Martine Whitehead April 22, 2013

The term *antecedent* is faithful to no discipline. It applies to ratios in mathematics, substantive clauses in grammar, and conditionals in logic, always signifying a preceding event when used in lay speech. Less frequently, *antecedent* is used to refer to earlier lives that invigorate the present speaker. In this usage, the word signals ancestors as agents in the memories, actions, and perhaps even fates of their contemporary bodies. It is this last definition of *antecedent* that concerns Patricia Fernández, whose exhibition *Box (a proposition for ten years)* is currently on view at Commonwealth and Council in Los Angeles.

Fernández's interactive *Box* was made specifically for Commonwealth and Council, and it is a continuation of a body of work engaged in knowledge production that accounts for antecedents, positing history as a subjective experience. *Box* was originally situated within a larger solo exhibition of the artist's work (which was de-installed April 6, 2013), including an installation, *It's yours now, It's all that there is* (2010), and the simultaneously released first edition of *Rue de Latran*, a serial, subscription-based artist's book released through [New Byzantium](#). Both *Its yours now* and *Rue de Latran* trace the artist's relationship to her father and to the radical French printing press, Ruedo Ibérico.

In the original installation, Fernández's painting, prints, shelves, bits of stone and tile, and wrapped packages—all nods to the now defunct

press—appeared throughout the gallery in corners, at baseboards, and underneath things. Traveling through the rooms of Commonwealth and Council gave one the sense that a viewer's path through the space—one's leaving, return, and meandering in between—was as integral to the installation as the physical objects.

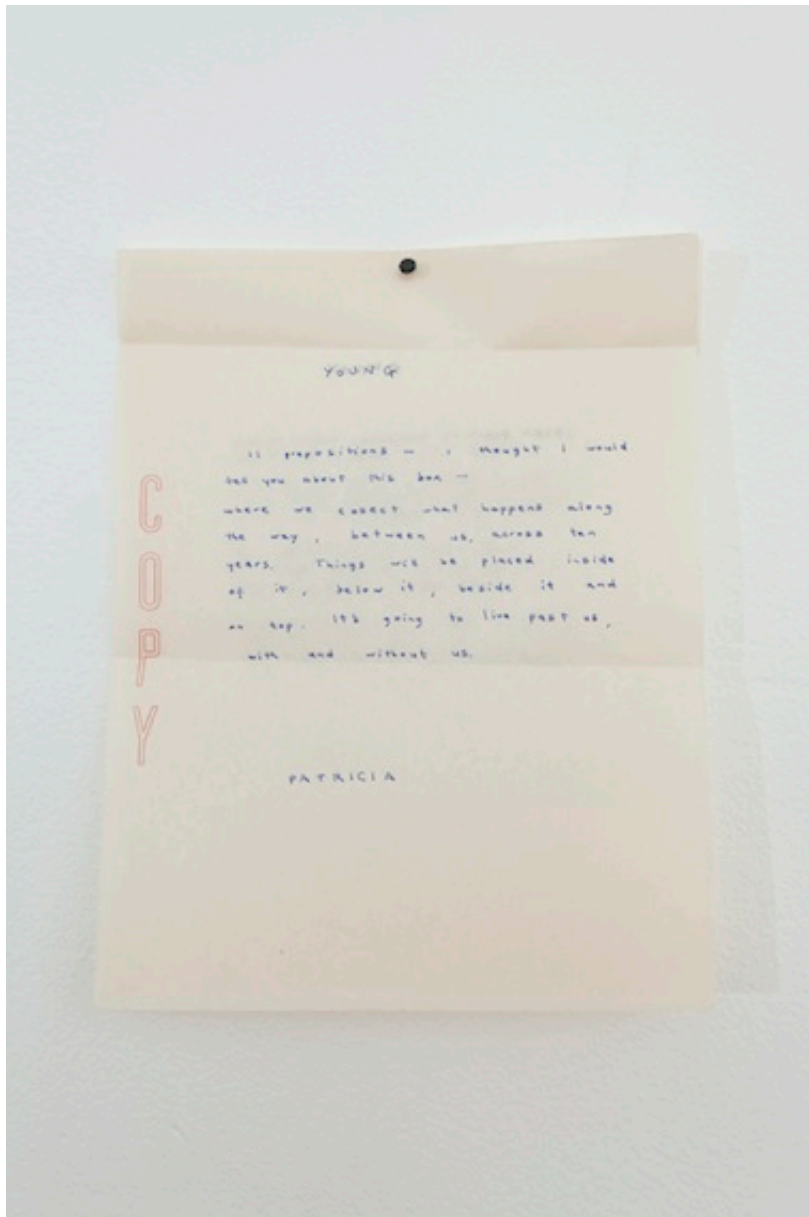
What remains after the April 6 de-installation is *Box*, which now occupies its own room. A handwritten note, addressed to the Commonwealth and Council founder and director Young Chung and signed by the artist, hangs on the wall to introduce the work. It reads:

*11 propositions—I thought I would tell you about this box—where we collect what happened along the way, between us, across ten years. Things will be placed inside of it, below it, beside it and on top. It's going to live past us, with and without us.*

The box itself, a dark wooden structure standing waist-high with simple joints and stamped with a trademark “X” pattern that Fernández borrowed from her grandfather, opens at the top to reveal a stone. Presumably collected during one of Fernández's walks across the Pyrenees, retracing the path of exile taken by Spaniards at the end of Spain's Civil War, the stone is presented with a folded drawing and a dazzling piece of blue embroidery. While the textile is made in the same pattern in which Fernández's grandmother embroidered, the piece is not an object created by her grandmother.



Patricia Fernández. *Box (a proposition for ten years)*, 2012-22 (detail); mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.



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This significant difference, suggested by the contrast in fabric integrity between the newer, brighter embroidery and a few, more tattered relics, was confirmed by Chung. Like all of Fernández's work, the box's initial simplicity unfolds further after second and third glances to offer

other possibilities to what we think we know, and to reveal masterfully crafted and intricately designed objects developed over time.

With *Box*, Fernández is interrogating epistemologies of the temporal self, playing with both what we know and how we know it. She develops her fictions through several steps, first on walks across the border between Spain and France and then in the studio through repetitious craftsmanship. These carefully woven narratives are rendered as fact and hinted at in hidden places. Beneath a replica of her grandmother's embroidery rests an original piece of doily-like cloth. A blurry photo of a family is tucked beneath a shelf. Translucent prints fall from the pages of *Rue de Latran*, which is itself a puzzle of fabrications, including handwritten letters between herself and a family member. All of these subtle insertions raise questions for a viewer: What is real in the master narrative, and what is pieced together from Fernández's flawed memories and inventive fantasies?

There is certain violence inherent in the idea of creating one's history in the absence of tangible artifacts or first-person accounts. At the same time, this subjective approach to history making as an active project undertaken by the living disrupts a hegemonic notion of history as objective and final. Though she is working from the perspective of an object maker, Fernández is in direct conversation with artist collectives like the Otolith Group and the Atlas Group. While both of these collectives primarily use time-based and hyper-textual media to explore the limits of subjectivity and memory in narratives meant to establish collective histories, they are useful points of comparison in evaluating Fernández's practice.

Fernández plays with the spectrum of this dialectic between violent and libRARY remembering with *Box*. The piece is a ten-year work-in-progress, to which Chung is encouraged to contribute. Each year, Chung will exhibit *Box* with additions from the collections of Fernández, Chung, or anyone else Chung invites to contribute. In this way, Chung's life—his memory and subjectivity—is incorporated into and becomes a part of *Box*'s archive of antecedents. This tactic is similar to the way the Atlas Group introduces, for example, documentation of Lebanese sunsets into the narrative of the Lebanese Civil War.

The incorporation of seemingly unrelated visual memory into the archive—via *Operator #17: I only wish that I could weep*, in the case of the Atlas Group, or via Chung's contributions in Fernández's case—creates two important disruptions to common notions of history. The first is a flattening of the traditionally hegemonic structure of the archive, wherein a singular individual, organization, or cultural group holds the keys to collective memory. The second disruption is subtler and reconstitutes the archive as an active, living space: it renders history as a phenomenological event perpetually in the process of becoming.<sup>1</sup>

*Box (a proposition for ten years)* is on view at [Commonwealth and Council](#), in Los Angeles, through May 4, 2013.

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NOTES:

1. Robby Herbst, "We Are Becoming: Artist-organized Spaces in Los Angeles." *Artbound*, episode broadcast on March 26, 2013 KCET, Los Angeles. <http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/los-angeles/artist-organized-spaces-los-angeles.html>.

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