

Gabrielle de la Puente  
and Stefanie Schwarzwimmer

2022

Emoji summary: 🍷👉👉👉🔥

Gabrielle de la Puente What are the main concerns of your practice, and where do you think they came from? When I look at artists, I always think there are a million outcomes possible and I wonder why they chose to do what they do over anything else.

Stefanie Schwarzwimmer When I applied for art school, I could tick several boxes for classes I was interested in. I chose photography, which was my obvious interest, and abstract painting. Looking back, I have no idea why—I guess I had the naïve idea that it would be liberating to make something “inaccurate.” Also: I came from a very hands-on education in graphic design, and I thought that abstraction was the way to counter this experience. Surprisingly, I got accepted to this class. However, I had no talent and no understanding for the issues the painters around me were dealing with. They seemed like they were possessed by their tools and never knew when a painting was finished, as if some sort of higher entity were forcing them to carry on and on. I could not relate. I accurately drew motifs from photos from the internet—cats, stock images, fruit. The drawing was done when it looked as realistic as I was able to make it. Then I would be very happy about it, but would also feel ashamed because I felt like I’d failed my professor. After two years, he actually strongly advised me to leave the class—which was awkward back then, but makes me a bit proud today. At some point drawing felt too archaic to me, like an alibi—so, I went on YouTube and I stumbled upon tutorials for Blender (that’s an open-source 3D software). I modeled cups, donuts, and flags, and the minute I rendered my first image, I was hooked. It felt like a really elaborate way to play with a doll house, and I still, after using the program for many years now, lose track of time whenever I enter the software. Andrew Prize aka Blender Guru became my new professor. My computer was my portal of knowledge and means of production at the same time. (I want to end this paragraph here for dramaturgical reasons. However, I’m eternally grateful to Constanze Ruhm, Barbara Kapusta, and Axel Stockburger for letting me transfer to the class of Art and Media and for accompanying me until my graduation.)

Realism is an important factor in my work, not just in terms of the “Is it Cake” moment, but also in terms of relatability. Speaking from the standpoint of an average TV/social media consumer, I create small narrations that can be read both as observations of and comments on various aspects of contemporary culture—for instance alleged ghost sightings, YouTube genres, or CCTV footage. I like to call these “low-key fiction” because the outcome should seem familiar, but also just slightly off. . . I want people from different ages and backgrounds to be able to engage with the work. Some might speculate about technical aspects, some might vibe with the atmosphere, and others might feel triggered to make lofty interpretations about capitalism and neoliberal work conditions. All good.

G How do these concerns translate into artistic outcomes?

S I want to make art about things I know, topics that circulate in my mind, content that I watch with friends (shout out to Andrea for being the best friend and content provider I could wish for). . . So, inspiration hits when it hits. There are always more ideas than time or money to realize. When I’m working on something new, I think about how I’d like the final artwork to feel . . . like that one part of a Rihanna song, or the wise but also at times whimsical voice of David Attenborough. . . I think about the space and about details like lighting, sounds, and smells. I want various senses to be triggered. This part is really exciting because everything is still up in the air—it’s this phase before the obligatory disappointments due to technical shortcomings, inadequate time, or lack of funding hit. I like to go for long walks then, and carry the idea around like a baby, nurture it, allow it to grow. . . Eventually I’ll place myself in front of the computer. I like to squat in my office chair—to me it’s very comfortable and helps me concentrate (like gathering all my energy in a ball. . .). My partner calls it the “egg pose.” I can sit in this position for weeks/months and build interiors and animations in Blender. Plans and

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scripts change fluidly until Christopher Schmidt, designer and aforementioned partner, comes in and makes the animations come to life by creating the soundscapes. For the text, I record the friends who kindly agree to voice act.

Nowadays, creating something new is very much intertwined with the way my life is structured. I have a day job as a graphic designer, which I like, but which also keeps my headspace more or less occupied. In your podcast, you describe that you both used to have or still have day jobs, as well. I was wondering in what way that affected your writing? Did it? Personally, I often struggle with time issues, but also with prioritizing my art over the work that pays my bills. . .

G I think I probably wouldn't have admitted how much having a second job affected my writing because I wanted to believe I could do it all, have it all. But it wasn't until I quit my second job (because I got sick with Long Covid) that I finally saw what was happening there. With so much more time on my hands—and even though I had so much less energy to work with—my writing grew because I ended up spending all my time on it. I was very self-conscious of the fact I *needed* to spend longer on my writing because of the neurological impact Covid had had on me, but I think that's only part of the equation.

With double the time to write, I wrote for twice as long. I was like a fish growing to the size of its fish tank; once I was in the ocean I decided to explode. I have been able to think more deeply (to my surprise) and edit to my heart's content, tweaking texts until they finally say what I want them to say. My texts are longer now but they are also much more thoughtful, and if I am allowed to say so, I think they are more beautiful too. I should explain that last clause. It's like I realized that I don't always care about saying something profound, as long as I have said something in a way that is pleasurable to read. I started to care much more about the words themselves, the order I put them in, the combinations, the sounds, the feeling as they fly through the reader's head. The difference is that when I had another job, I never thought about any of that because I was in such a rush. I just wanted to say something quickly with a punch, and now I want the punch to look cool in mid-air.

It's been hard because with one less job, I have half the income I used to. But I live in a relatively cheap city and my health means I don't go outside and spend money on all the things I used to. I don't really get to save any money at the moment, which does give me anxiety, but in a sense, all the background anxiety stays very background when you have sickness to deal with. I don't want to be grateful for any of this—it has been a traumatic time mentally and physically—but I can say that I am happy that despite everything, my writing has moved forward in this way.

How have the past two years affected your practice?

S Right, it's awkward to admit, but in many aspects, I had a good time. The time felt weirdly meaningful. Especially during the first lockdown, my partner and I would go shopping for groceries and stare at the empty pasta shelves, thinking "this is historic". . . Then we would go home and eat not pasta, but home-made sourdough bread 🍞. Of course, this is an extremely privileged view of the situation—being comfortable at home when at the same time there was something looming outside our door and inside our screens that harshly affected the whole world mentally, physically, and structurally, and not everyone was able to shelter from it or cope with it similarly.

My artistic practice looked pretty much the same as always. I sat in front of the computer. If anything, I think the pandemic entered into my topics in an inspiring way because, as in earlier works, I would circle around people's private spheres, wondering how they behaved when no one was looking. In my film *Silent Revolution* (2018), for example, I stage a mysterious incident with a plate that seems to have a life of its own. By showing a variety of interiors in allegedly different countries, the scenes in the film present themselves as if they were depicting a global phenomenon.

Being cut off from the rest of the world caused me to wonder even more

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about other people's domestic lives and about the horror that lies in the everyday. . .

G Of course, the title of *If these walls could talk, they would cough and go back to bed* (2021) feels very of its time, doesn't it.

How did that film come about? Could you describe the process from beginning to end, and the end result too?

S *If these walls could talk, they would cough and go back to bed* is an installation I made for my first noteworthy solo show in a non-profit gallery in Brussels. I wanted to make something site-specific, but I also wanted the protagonist of the artwork to be something as immaterial as the rendered image itself. I thought of fire because of its destructive qualities and its ability to spread itself until someone stopped it from doing so. I wanted to portray the fire as if it were itself in charge and the room its unimpressed witness. . . (hence the title). The show consisted of an installation of ten yellow crime-scene markers, a 3D-animated video with sound shown on a TV, a TV stand, a carpet floor with a circular burn mark, and the smell of burnt wood. The video shows a digital copy of the room that is being "filmed" by what appears to be security cameras placed in all four corners. In the footage, occasional fire formations appear and disappear again for no apparent reason.

There is a voiceover that can be understood as a stream of consciousness circulating around the alleged "crime scene" in the gallery. It speculates on the terms "causalities," "witnessing," and "evidence." It does so in a very serious and structured manner, so one might try to make sense of it, but the text is pseudo-philosophical at best and keeps drifting off into pop culture trivia and personal anecdotes.

The string samples throughout the film help stress and/or question the image/text. They reference clichéd scores of horror movies, where they are used to enhance the feeling of suspense as they foreshadow the horror. In the film, they keep announcing something that does not appear or is followed by a piece of text that contradicts or negates the text before.

G When I read your answers, I was reminded of how much freedom artists have. I am envious! As a critic, I am responding to a specific art-thing. I am tied to it and I feel like what I write must show the rope, talk about the rope, describe how the rope feels around me. But you say that the text in *If these walls could talk, they would cough and go back to bed* is "pseudo-philosophical at best," you edit in fire that isn't there, the script is abstract, and you talk about adapting parts of culture to create "low-key fiction" to suit your purposes. You have a looseness about your thinking that is very dreamlike, and I want to ask you how it feels. Is it fun? Do you feel powerful?

S Yes, I think there's great freedom in being an unreliable narrator. However, I often need to remind myself that I'm in charge and that I don't have to stick to the rules I think I'm supposed to stick to. . . There's a feeling of relief and excitement when you "allow" yourself to deviate from the beaten path. Not so much because you want to do something different for its own sake, but because you are giving in to an urge. Ultimately, these are the moments that make art production worthwhile. I enjoy it a lot, but it's also very hard for me to put something into words when I apply for funding because "dreamlike" doesn't sound all that relevant. In this case I need a strong rope as well, but there's the possibility of cutting it up later and braiding it into your hair. . .

I think worldbuilding always comes with a certain god complex. I am the master of my 3D-modelled interior scene. I construct both the overall structure and every detail. I create light and shading, water and fire. Haha. I feel powerful in terms of making decisions on my own, but I don't want to consider my art a private hobby—so I depend on having an audience and also on their judgement. The power dynamics shift when you put yourself/your art out there. You feel naked. And not everyone is comfortable naked. I don't even enjoy going to the sauna that much.

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G What you say about not having to stick to the rules and traditions of art is something I really need reminding of. I did a Fine Art degree—I never trained as a writer—and so you would think the freedom and power you are playing with is something I'd remember to play with as well. We started *The White Pube* to write differently because everything we saw was so dry, stiff, professional, and academic, and so our early texts were quite loose and very, very fast. But as our audience grew, I think I became self-conscious, and I started trying to write in a way that meant there were no holes in the boat.

I was speaking to the artist and game designer v buckenham (<http://v21.io>) recently because I haven't felt satisfied with my writing in the past few weeks, and they described the corporate term "innovation budget" to me. They said at a former game studio they worked at, there was a mantra of doing "one weird thing," making art—or whatever, games, writing—in a way that was understandable and comfortable to an audience in all ways but one. Something had been innovated. For my writing, I keep thinking about whether it's the subject I should twist, or the way I write about it. I guess if I twisted both it would become poetry, and that means I've gone too far?

I think the subject and you writing about it are always connected regardless. The subject takes form in your words—so how would you twist the subject if not through your words? When I read your reviews, most of the time I have no previous knowledge of the art/artist/institution you're talking about. So you're in the powerful position of placing images in my head. Personally, I prefer them to be more on the poetic side because the openness of a twist allows me to wander off as well. . .

S I often have a hard time making scripts or specific plans in advance because I know that this kind of linear process doesn't really work for me. The chosen subject and its method of production always interfere and I don't know from the very beginning what thoughts or ideas might come up during the process. This vagueness is exciting but also makes the work fragile until the very end. . . The only way to cope with that, I think, is to learn to trust your own creativity. It's there, don't worry. Good things will happen when you put yourself to work. And sometimes it's the holes in the boat that make an epic story. Leonardo DiCaprio would never have made it if it hadn't been for a certain boat hitting a certain ice block. Who knows who will benefit from your "inconsistencies" . . .

G I had to re-read that last part because I thought something had happened to Leonardo da Vinci and a boat that I never knew about, lol. I love the small holes that lead to the kind of serendipity you never could have fabricated yourself. I am over the big holes and their drama.

S You were very open about having Long Covid and how it is affecting you. Do you think that it has changed your creative output in any way?

G Part of that I answered earlier in terms of the writing process: I take much longer than I used to, my memory is worse, and so I am constantly asking the people around me to help me find the word I'm looking for. I find it hard to hold the whole shape of a text in my mind—I am constantly referring back to what I said before so I don't lose my train of thought. But beyond the logistics, plenty of other things have changed in line with my new body.

This is obvious, but I have a whole new appreciation for artists and writers who think through sickness and disability in their work. It's weird. I never had a label before this. Yes, I'm a woman, but it never affected me much before. Now I have a disability and it's bizarre in a thousand ways but finding that other people have touched on the sensitivities—and the weirdness too—long before I got here has been incredibly meaningful. I had even read some essays about disability before this point, like Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory," but reading them again now, I know in my bones that what it means has been huge. This is all to say that it has made me want to write about sickness myself. I want to contribute! I have not held back in my writing about Long Covid, and I am glad. It is a new umbrella of illnesses (that mimic so many old ones), and I hope I can help to orient people emotionally while I continue to figure out how I feel about it myself.

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I also think that my feelings around my subject matter have shifted in other ways. I care less about art and exhibition practice because for a year I couldn't go to galleries, and now I can only get there if I get a taxi on a good day and then rest afterwards. I appreciate video games more, books, films, music. I care more about the culture I can access at home, in *bed*. The White Pube was made for art criticism, and so I think my shift to writing mostly about games has made me feel very worried in terms of our readership (especially as it's our readers who pay our wages on Patreon), but I think I've gotten away with it? It took a while but we get messages now from people who say they enjoy the game writing, and in fact, it's brought game people over to The White Pube who wouldn't have come for the art.

S It's very unfortunate that these circumstances led to it, but I have to say that as a reader I appreciate that shift or rather that expansion of topics immensely. Computer games entered the art scene a while ago, but I think that the canonical art discourse around the genre is very academic, very detached, and with an in-your-face need to point out that this is art made with the computer. Zero One you know.

What you bring to the table is different because you know what you're talking about. You experience gaming not just from reading about it and then "appropriating" it. You are gaming and are not afraid to say so. You don't seem to have the need to distinguish between "high" art and pop culture and that anti-classist and post-ironic tone is something I can really relate to and is also something I've been missing in the art criticism so far.

Btw, there's the Austrian author Clemens Setz, who started writing because he suffered from serious migraines from playing computer games. In interviews, he says that reading and later writing eased his symptoms. I guess it works both ways. . . in any case it's important to listen to your body.

G I get that. I think reading and writing have been a lifeline, especially with an illness that has challenged my ability to even articulate things. Reading and writing have been like a very constant therapy to remember how to speak, think, and feel.

Before we end, who is your favorite housewife from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, and why? Conversely, who is your least favorite?

S Generally, I guess I'm very receptive to the Bravo TV editing. I think I always side with the characters they want me to side with. Or—if I am in a mood—I deliberately do the opposite. My favorite housewife is Kyle. She's not always the most interesting, but she's genuine and steady.

Least favorite: Lisa Rinna. Annoying voice, annoying look, annoying everything. I do think it's funny, though, that she's still working for a home shopping channel—like this would be her day job to pay the bills to support her otherwise precarious life. . . lol

G My favorite is Kyle as well! Yeah, she's definitely not the most interesting character but I like her steadiness too. I wish I was one of her daughters, lol. I think I would be so well looked after. My least favorite is Sutton. I think she would be too judgmental. Wait, why am I rating them all in terms of potential mothers? I guess it's that old art world insecurity: I wish I had rich parents.