

A Journey On Foot

– Nuria Rodríguez

14/29

Unwrapping myself, and being myself not Alberto Caeiro,
But a human animal that nature produced.

Alberto Caeiro

Poem I. Los poemas de Alberto Caeiro [The Poems of Alberto Caeiro]

And I turn my eyes back, I turn towards the past unlive;
I look at it and the past is like a future to me.

Álvaro de Campos

Poem IV. Los poemas de Álvaro de Campos [The Poems of Álvaro Campos]

I Perhaps that is how it all started: they looked, they thought, and painted what was around; before there were art, science or religion, it must have been that way.

The Journey

What is true is that we do not have chronicles and certainties on how it started, nor what intention they had, or who where the first in proposing such an initiative, but it is possible that such was the first attempt at “thinking and classifying” what surrounded them, a timid yet highly creative action of using intelligence to know and adapt themselves to their environment; to recognise themselves in it, in its space, as yet another ingredient of the strange existence of things and beings.

Thinking/classifying the world, thinking/classifying daily things, thinking/classifying what can be covered on foot, but, why collecting every mountain, every island, every rock, every plant, every word, every single thing once and again?

To travel the world, Percec wrote, *will not be more than knowing a few areas*, some closer or faraway areas, dirt roads which weave orange skies at sunset, surrounded by anonymous bushes, rocks and branches in all diverse forms. I tend to walk every evening or go for a run, if I have the energy. I think I prefer to walk at the end of the day, because locking myself in the studio for the longest possible time takes precedence, so going outdoors helps me discover the focus on other things, the things I find, the things that suddenly appear and which I later bring to the studio so they form part of the archive, of the system that I have imagined to understand the unknown. Such is the time when a thick net of relationships between conscious memory and intuitive emotion is woven.

II Gathering

The previous exhibition, titled “Natural History [The Infinite Collection]”, already proposed many of the explorative paths that once again project themselves in “Humboldt System. Thinking/Painting”. A certain tendency to the fragment rather than to the system, the predisposition towards massive construction or the possible danger that sometimes labyrinthine knowledge fosters in the search of a pinch of contradiction; which happens with clashes or convulsions between random and what is measurable, planned. Writer and sociologist Roger Caillois in his book *Rocks* would say: “I do not pretend to recognise species, but to make the strength of a fascination perceptible. In this somewhat hallucinated vision which animates what is inert and which goes beyond the perceived, sometimes I had the impression of capturing live one of the possible births of poetry”.

When one comes to meet things, with no desire to dominate, subjugate or control them, but with the intention to get closer to listen, learn, understand, it does not seem completely necessary to have an hermetic system of appropriation. It would be more adequate to leave room for an ample space for new associations, in a combinatory *ars*. It combines what is found and kept to shake everything and provoke new narratives that would justify all that will be part of an infinite collection.

In the preface to *About Words and Things*, Michel Foucault declared that the genesis of his writings hatched after reading one of the tales in the book *Other Inquisitions*, by Borges. Specifically, it is the story “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” [The Analytical Language of John Wilkins]. In it there is a brief reference to a “Chinese enciclopedia” which orders natural history with a provocative tone, “animals are divided into a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) domesticated, d) piglets, e) sirens, f) mythological, g) stray dogs, h) included in this classification, i) crazily agitated, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a fine camel-hair brush, l) etcetera, m) having just broken the vase, n) looking like flies from afar”.



I dive in that oxymoron that Zambrano proposes as a compendium of her poetic reason, pointing at the intermitent flashes of random as a necessary element for the knowledge of the invisible...

While I examine each of the categories trying to find the invisible connections between them, I notice that Borges has opted for creating an alphabetically ordered enumeration. Its ambiguous logic puzzles when we observe the incongruous natures that it lays out. I think of how complex it may be to attempt to set the universe in order in an *atlas of the impossible*, is this not what happens every time we attempt to find an exact place to name or represent things?

In my eagerness to gather in order to understand how a system is constructed and what could its use be in case it found, I discover the essay *Poema y sistema [Poem and System]* by María Zambrano. She wrote it from exile. I dive in this oxymoron that Zambrano proposes as a compendium of her poetic reason. It signals random's intermitent glimmers as necessary elements for knowing the invisible; it also signals reason as a torch that brings light to those findings and encounters. I follow this path that I just opened, and which links Benjamin¹ with Zambrano².

1 “Creative superation of religious illumination is indubitably not found in stupeficients, but in a specific pagan illumination, of materialistic inspiration”. *El surrealismo. Works II*, 1, p.303. Online search: [<https://www.circulobellasartes.com/benjamin/termino.php?id=450>]

2 “Passion alone scares truth away”, and, on the other hand “reason by itself does not manage to surprise the prey”, but “passion and reason together [...] can pick up the naked truth”, in “Hacia un saber sobre el alma” [Towards a Wisdom of the Soul]. María Zambrano, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2019. p.15.



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Teseo



Me acuerdo

III

Thinking

(Simmering Desire Since Childhood)

I remember that February 3rd of 2016 there was a possibility to find a reasoned, poetical nexus between the scientific collections of the Universitat de València and the art production of a new, *own* Natural History, in an attempt to name, represent and interpret the world.

Enquiring about the heritage legacies of the 32 collections of the university, I find out that German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (Berlin, 1769-1859)

was in Valencia using state-of-the-art scientific instruments of the time. His plan was to winter between Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid to travel, finally, to the desired, unknown places that the books *Paul et Virginie [Paul and Virginia]* and *El nuevo Robinson [The New Robinson]* had built in his imaginarium. In those dates, whoever wanted to travel to New Spain needed to be authorised by king Carlos IV. **The Submerged Library I.**

Often I have asked myself why it was Alexander von Humboldt who became my alter ego in this new journey. As I read all that fell into my hands, sometimes disguised as a historian, I would find an answer that encouraged me to continue to the next base camp. Perhaps it was finding his words: “three things at once”, or his reflection around the unpredictability of random as a method, or trying to find a balance between intuition’s fast thinking and that methodical thinking in the realm of science. Because of this, Humboldt became an excellent companion in this adventure, to experience in the first person what is read and studied in books, what is supposed to be the voices of others, other ways to look into the world.

I reflect and think that **travelling on foot** is travelling on your body, travelling with the limbs of the human animal that we are. With no mechanisms nor projecting artifacts, with all that we are on our backs, to adventure into the blank spaces, those that do not exist yet, the unnamed ones. Sometimes the South Pole must be touched, sometimes what needs to be done is to crawl all the way to the Chimborazo and, other times, to cover three consecutive times an infinite circle to the *Venta de la Senieta/Sanieta/Sienita* [La Senieta/Sanieta/Sienita Inn]. To move across space to find.

Alexander von Humboldt and his travel companion, French botanist Aimé Bonpland, chose to go to Madrid skirting the Mediterranean coast because they are in Marseille, after disappointing news on yet another frustrated expedition to the north of Africa. This was the first time this happened to them.

Their itinerary along the Mediterranean overlapped in some sections with the longest Roman road of Hispania: the Via Augusta. Humboldt was over the moon with the perspective of travelling on the ancient path that connected the Mediterranean coast, the cradle of classical cultures and of the concept of *Kosmos*, with the Spanish court. He wrote to botanist Willdenow, also his mentor, relaying his adventures, “I walked most of the journey, along the Mediterranean coast, along Certe, Montpellier, Narbonne, Perpignan, the Pyrenees, Catalonia all the way to Valencia and Murcia, going through La Mancha plateau to arrive here». He added: «While in the valleys of the Pyrenees crops of legumes prospered, El Canigó elevated its summit covered in snow. In Catalonia and Valencia the land is a neverending garden, decorated with cactus and *pita* (agave). The date palm trees, of 40 or 50 feet, loaded with clusters of fruit, raise over the height of monestries. [...] The fields turned green again and in barren land we picked narcissus and jonquils. [...] The bassin in which the city of Valencia sits [...] is so exuberant, it has no equivalent in Europe. [...] How soon the discomforts of the paths and the inns where there is not even bread to be eaten, amidst the frondosity of this vegetation and the indescribable physical beauty of these people!”³

³ Humboldt to K.L. Willdenow, Aranjuez, 20-4-1799, in Jahn, I. and Lange, F. (ed.), *Die Jugendbriefe Alexander von Humboldts 1787-1799*, Akademie, Berlin, 1973 (Beiträge zur Alexander-von-Humboldt-Forschung, 2), p. 662-663. Leitner, U., “El diario de Alexander von Humboldt en España” (Alexander von Humboldt’s Journal in Spain), in *Asclepio. Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia*, vol. LXIII, nr. 2, July-December, pp. 545-572. ISSN: 0210-4466.

He even anotates in his diary:

With a speed of about 5.4 feet in 1" I frequently cover, in one day, 14 French leagues, stopping to rest only once every hour. A geographic mile, 24,000 feet, is covered every hour and 28 minutes. To measure big bases of 300 toesas with steps it is very important to find out the speed with which one walks steadily, Each person has their own muscle force idiosincrazy according to the speed and in this, the error margin is very small.

Checking the chronometer very precisely:

- a. Walking slowly for 1 minute, 115 steps = 258 Parisian feet.
- b. Walking quickly during 1 minute, 120 steps = 270 Parisian feet.
- c. Walking very fast during 1 minute, 150 steps = 337 Parisian feet.

He adds some data on the botanical species that he knows, as well as he gives some explanations on the climate they find in January and February 1799 in the region of Valencia.

[Botany]

In January 1799 around Valencia we can see in bloom:

Cistus manifoldus and *Cistus incanus*. *Bellus perennis*. *Rosmarinus*. *Euphorbia serrata*. *Thymus serpyllum*. *Viburnum opulus*. *Amygdalus persica*. *Globularia alypum* *Daphne*. *Erica vagans*. *Erica mediterranea*. *Calendula officinalis*. *Sonchus*. *Clipeola maritima*. *Sinapis*. *Passerina*. *Genista Scorpius*. *Spartium*. *Narcissus Jonquilla*. *Helleborus niger*. *Melocotoneros*. *Geranium romanum*. *Guisantes*. *Judías*. *Satureja officinalis*. *Cucurbita*. *Galium*. *Polygonum maritimum*. *Vinca pervinca*. *Lamium purpureum*. *Plantago maritima*. *Salvia*. *Arbutus unedo*. *Stachys recta*. *Lavendula stoechas*. *Lavendula multifida*. *Potentilla*. *Rhamnus alaternus*. *Lavatera maritima*.

[The Climate]

An observation on the gentleness of climate. Olive trees everywhere and very beautiful in La Macha, at a height of 430 toesas. Where specific plant names are missing, we correct it with Bonpland's book.

Climate

In the Kingdom of Valencia, the thermometer already marked 18° in January in the shade and during several weeks, between 12° and 14°. However, all trees and bushes were so naked as if it had been 50°. Even the buds had not developed yet. Only the leaves of the trees that have a dried up parenchyma (*Citrus laurus*, *Viburnum tinus*, *Olea europea*, *Chamaerops humilis*). In Galicia, in the warm valleys were the trunk of *Laurus nobilis* reaches 40 feet, *Fagus Castanea* still did not have new leaves on May 26. The tree leaves are introduced all over Spain barely three weeks before than in Berlin. Generally, still in the middle of May is when everything presents itself completely regreened. Why in Valencia, where the buds of poppler, maple and beech do not develop, when the sun shines for several months? How quickly a warm day stimulates vegetation in the North! Is winter atmosphere lacking something that in springtime awakens plants, for instance the great electrical charge of the spring atmosphere? Perhaps in the South, plants grow with such slowness or are so insensitive because heat is a regular stimulation for them, since sap is always in them in activity, and the duration of the day grants them a nearly perpetually even solar stimuli. In the North, winter slumber cumulates plant irritability, lacking sun heat for nearly four months. The light of long summer days produces, after the long winter nights, snow and sleet, which contains plenty solved oxygen.⁴

On July 11th, 2018, I walked on the beach of Cabanes and around La Senieta Inn. I feel happy to walk the place where Humboldt spent the night of February 2nd, 1799. Although a rain-storm breaks out with strength, against all logic in those dates, turning the paths into impassable quagmires, I constantly return to sit in the shade of the olive trees and the *Chamaerops humilis* (fan palm) during this scorching summer. It had taken me so many months to find its real location that I did not want to miss the opportunity to walk in this area. Soon enough some new landlords were going to use La Senieta Inn as their dwellings and as a place dedicated to dog breeding.

In this period, I discover that my grandfather, whom I take after, was born in the sea, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a nameless territory in Ptolomeo's cosmography.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

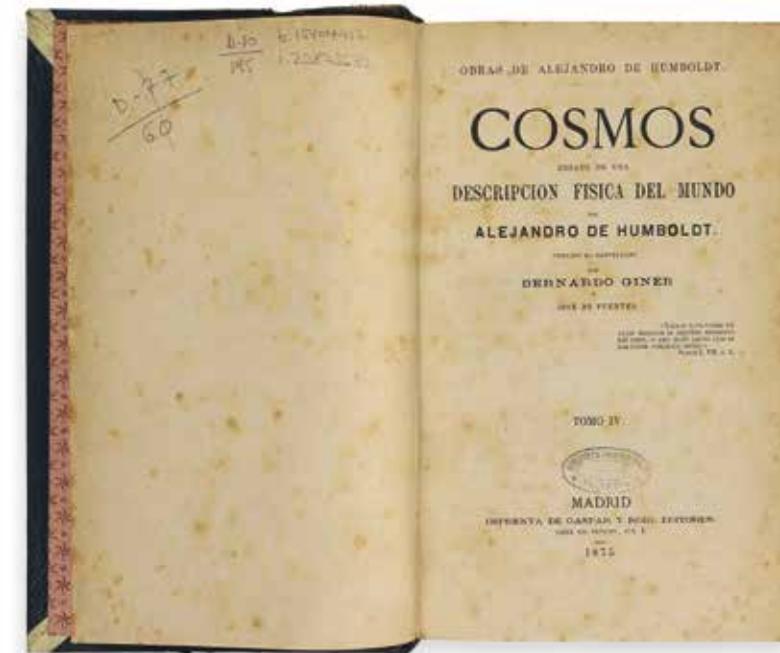
Other Systems

In 1938 the *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism* was published. Poets André Breton and Paul Éluard proposed a dictionary-collage, to gather a set of words, such as Baudelaire, bird, butterfly, chair, daydream, dream, Duchamp, Ernst, exit, fossile, Friday, glove, horse, humour, index, language, Novalis, ocean, painting, random, red, rock, spark, soap, time, tower, universe, Westerdahl, whale, woman, work, X, Y and Z, among many others.

On his part, in 1954, painter Alberto Savinio or Andrea de Chirico, reversible in some occasions, presented his book *Nueva Enciclopedia* [New Enciclopedia] with these words, "So disappointed I am with enciclopediaeas that I made my own for my personal use". Such reflection uttered in the middle of the twentieth century may surprise. Narratives *to make knowledge homogenous* were still an everyday aspiration. Savinio witnessed the tragic consequences of the wars that modernity had configured, glimpsing that the enciclopediaian desire created, in turn, a certain Western cartography plagued by blank spaces.

The Submerged Library II. Perec, in his book *Thinking/Classifying*, describes what he has on his desk. As I try to close this text for the catalogue of the exhibition *Sistema Humbolt. Thinking/Painting*, my eyes go over the mountains of books that I have on my own desk: *Desierto Sonoro* (Lost Children Archive) by Valeria Luiselli, novel *Cara de Pan* (Dough Face) by writer Sara Mesa, and beneath the voluminous edition of *Cosmos* by Sandra Rebok, there appears the catalogue the exhibition *El tiempo y las cosas* (*The Order of Time and Things*), by artist Hanne Darboven, in the *Reina Sofía* Museum; even more hidden, the volume *Enciclopedia* by Gonçalo M. Tavares. For a long time I had believed that I was developing a new enciclopedia for my own personal use, like Alberto Savinio did. However, I have not been able to write the articles that accompany the images that I was painting. Although I attempted to keep some equidistance between words and images, I believe that I have finally compiled an atlas of the impossible, a visual atlas of the lost and found.

...I believe I have finally compiled an atlas of the impossible, a visual atlas of the lost and found.



Alexandre von Humboldt, *Cosmos. A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*. Published in Spanish by Bernardo Giner and José Fuentes. Madrid, Gaspar y Roig Editores printing house, 1874-1875. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València



Rocks/Minerals/Stones (A/2019-16), 2019
Oil on paper, 76 x 57 cm

*If the universal has lead into a more personal gaze,
we could ask why are we giving things the capacity to
register our journeys and our findings.*

A Geography of Words and Things

Humboldt System attempts to think about which have been the places reached in this journey on foot, through selecting some concepts. We have tried to name the islands, territories, the mountains of our cosmography, thus proving what we have explained previously: arriving somewhere does not mean to initiate a process of domination. On the contrary, in many occasions, contemplating what is different may help to review, question what is constructed, making the traces and thought itineraries evident; those questions that the very human condition raises.

Nowadays, there is the possibility that one of the scientific landmarks that may define technological and social developments in the twenty-first century, would be the capacity of things to offer information on the behaviour of the global world and of each one of us in great detail. Our things, *those small things with which we establish relationships, point at a new reality of intangibles. They weave an invisible, inaprehensible network when we interact with them. How do we recover what is apparently invisible? If the universal has given way to a more personal gaze, we could question why do we give things the capacity to register our movements and our findings. What else do we expect to discover about ourselves? ...all the mountains, all the rocks, all the islands...*

Thus, the project starts with the glossary of the 48 pairs of concepts (A) stem from intuitive or Borgian association which, somehow, contrasts the words of the algorithm that lends the results a cold aura. On the one hand, it establishes the hierarchy of the most frequently used words in volumes I and II of *Cosmos*, and the more usual bigrams (B) in the book. To that end, we introduced the complete text without the footnotes –which are really extensive and contain very specific data– to focus on the main body of text in the essay. The bigrams are two-word groups, and our result displays the word pairs that precede such concepts.



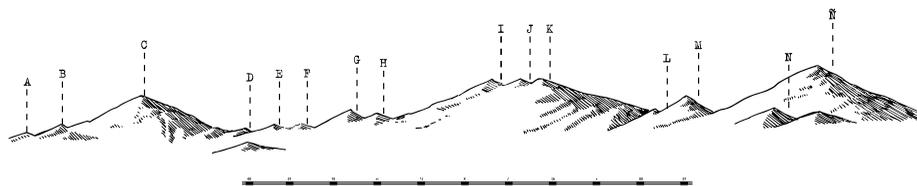
Detail. *Diccionario de cosas I (Dictionary of Things I)*, 2018
Graphite on paper, 49 x 78,5 cm



Gramática intuitiva E (Intuitive Grammar E), 2018
Graphite on paper, 35,2 x 48,5 cm

***GLOSSARY 48 words**
(Random)

- | | |
|--|--|
| A Atlas/Random | N Naturalis Historiae/Cosmos |
| B Botany/System | O Orion/Sirius/Rigel |
| C Cosmos/Microcosmos | P Palm Tree/Chamaerops humilis |
| D Diaries/The Journey | R Rocks/Minerals/Stones |
| E Encyclopédie/Prologue of Prologues | S Seneita/Sanieta/Sienita |
| F Blue Flower/Robinson Crusoe | T Three Things at the Same Time |
| G Geography/Walsen/Glacier | U Universe/Virtual |
| H Historie Naturelle/Collectaneenkästen | V Volcanos/Chimborazo |
| I Islands/The 10,000 Things | W or The Memory of Childhood |
| K Kafka/Story of Six Ideas | Y I/South/Surrealism |
| L Latitude/Bodies | Z Zeta/Expeditions |
| M Mediterranean/Analogous Mount | |



***BIGRAM**
The 214,728 words
from *COSMOS*, vol. I
and II
(The Unavoidable)

word1	word2	Count
stars	wandering	36
world	outside	30
ground/earth	firm	30
system	solar	28
history	natural	23
globe	earth	20
sea	Caspian	18
sea	red	18
system	planetary	18
geography	physics	16
ocean	Indian	16
sea	Mediterranean	14
ocean	Air	14
layers	Sedimentary	11
ocean	Atlantic	11
sea	Egean	10
world	primitive	10
stars	fixed	9
latitude	North	9
pole	magnetic	9
volcanos	active	9
air	free	8
layers	air	8
layers	earth	8
body	central	8
space	comprehended	8

Chart displaying the results of the algorithm and quantifies how many times those word pairs have been used in *Cosmos I* and *Cosmos II*.

III

Painting

(Touching the bottom
with the tips of my toes)

PROLOGUE OF PROLOGUES. I am seduced by all I find about Humboldt and I lose my historian disguise. I remember that the whale Moby Dick swallows me with gluttony; I must come up to the surface like Esther Williams in *Bathing Beauty*.

FOOTNOTE 1. I remember anonymous painters that came out to nature to capture the essence of that dissected beauty. I think of Maria Sibylla Merian who travelled to the Dutch colony of Surinam and focused in the study of insects, just as Margaret Fontaine, who collected about 22,000 butterflies and, aged 70, did not mind to cover 60 kilometres per day to add a rare species to her collection. I think of James Cook's expeditions, the failed expedition of Shackleton and Scott to Antarctica.

Sometimes, when you come out into nature to paint the landscape where you are, in which you find and gather plants, rocks or twigs, knowing that it is possible that they may be transformed into painting, some problems appear, which must be solved immediately, since the light conditions—depending on the season of the year in which you are travelling—vary with great speed. You must also decide things like composition, what is disposable, what is not relevant; the angle of the point of view. This, prior to that quick capture of sensations, colours and shapes. Finding a place from which to tell the synthesis of sensations that cumulate in this moment is not an easy task.

FOOTNOTE 2. I remember dipping in the Turia river believing I was Indiana Jones. Plunging into the water from the Tower of the submarine, and letting the currents and turbulences towards the dam carry me. It was one of the best ways to enjoy the interminable summer afternoons. It was in one of those cycles to the river that I found the fossil that I have now painted in blue and which has accompanied me to all the houses/studios I have lived in. All of us have boxes full of things we keep, they accompany us forever, as the rebel Scout in *To Kill a Mockinbird*.

FOOTNOTE 3. I remember playing with my sister in our childhood bedroom. I would enjoy more the preparations than the moment in which play seemed to be about to commence. I remember that we would place all our toys, all our things, around the perimeter of our room, stitched together like a neverending toy train that never tried to arrive anywhere, just to be within those four walls of our invisible island. Perhaps now, embarked in this expedition to the Antipodes, or to the South Pole of the contemporary, when sometimes, touching the bottom with the tips of my toes, in that "coming and going from here to there", amidst that amalgam of failure and random, which forms a recognisable portrait of the images of what is thought and what is painted.

Detail. *Gabinete de curiosidades*
(*Cabinet of curiosities*), 2015
Oil on linen, 150 x 137 cm

