

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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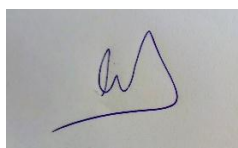
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MA Photography

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

Question 4. Time, Memory, and the Archive: In what ways do contemporary artists and designers reimagine time, memory, and archival practice, whether through repetition, rupture, slowness, or nonlinear temporality? How do these temporal aesthetics intersect with cultural, technological, or historical concerns?

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ABSTRACT

How does Óscar Muñoz challenge the photographic image as a stable site of memory by foregrounding process, traces, and time?

This essay examines how Óscar Muñoz challenges photography as a stable site of memory by reconfiguring it as a process of temporal and material instability. Rather than functioning as a fixed record of the past, the photographic image becomes a site where appearance is inseparable from disappearance and visibility is shaped through continuous transformation.

Focusing on *Aliento* (1996–2002) and *Narcisos Secos* (1994–95), the essay highlights two distinct but related articulations of time. In *Aliento*, the image emerges through the viewer's breath and disappears almost immediately, making visibility dependent on embodied interaction and perception. In contrast, *Narcisos Secos* constructs the image through processes such as evaporation, sedimentation, and the movement of carbon particles, where transformation occurs independently of the viewer. Here, the photograph operates as a system structured by entropic processes in which material change generates and dissolves the image.

Across both works, photography is displaced from archival stability and redefined as a temporal event. In *Aliento*, time is activated through encounter, while in *Narcisos Secos*, time is embedded within the material structure of the work itself. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace and Henri Bergson's notion of duration, the essay argues that photographic memory cannot be stabilised. Instead, the image exists only as a transient condition in which presence and loss remain inseparable.

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How does Óscar Muñoz challenge the photographic image as a stable site of memory by foregrounding process, traces, and time?

Introduction

This essay argues that Óscar Muñoz reconfigures the photographic image by displacing it from its traditional role as a stable site of memory into an entropic field of temporal and material transformation, where the image no longer functions as a fixed container of the past but as an event in which appearance is inseparable from disappearance.

This challenges the assumption that photography guarantees access to what has been, undermining the idea that images can preserve memory or stabilise the past. Instead, Muñoz shows that visibility is conditioned by processes that simultaneously produce and erode it. The image becomes a threshold rather than a container: something that happens in time rather than existing outside it.

What is at stake is not only the instability of representation but also a reconfiguration of perception itself. The viewer participates in the conditions through which visibility is produced and undone. The photographic image, therefore, shifts from object to event, something that must be continuously produced rather than passively received.

This essay develops this through two case studies: *Aliento* (Breath) (1996–2002), which stages the image as a breath-activated apparition that exists only within its own vanishing, and *Narcisos Secos* (Dried Narcissus) (1994–95), which constructs self-portraits through evaporation and sedimentation.

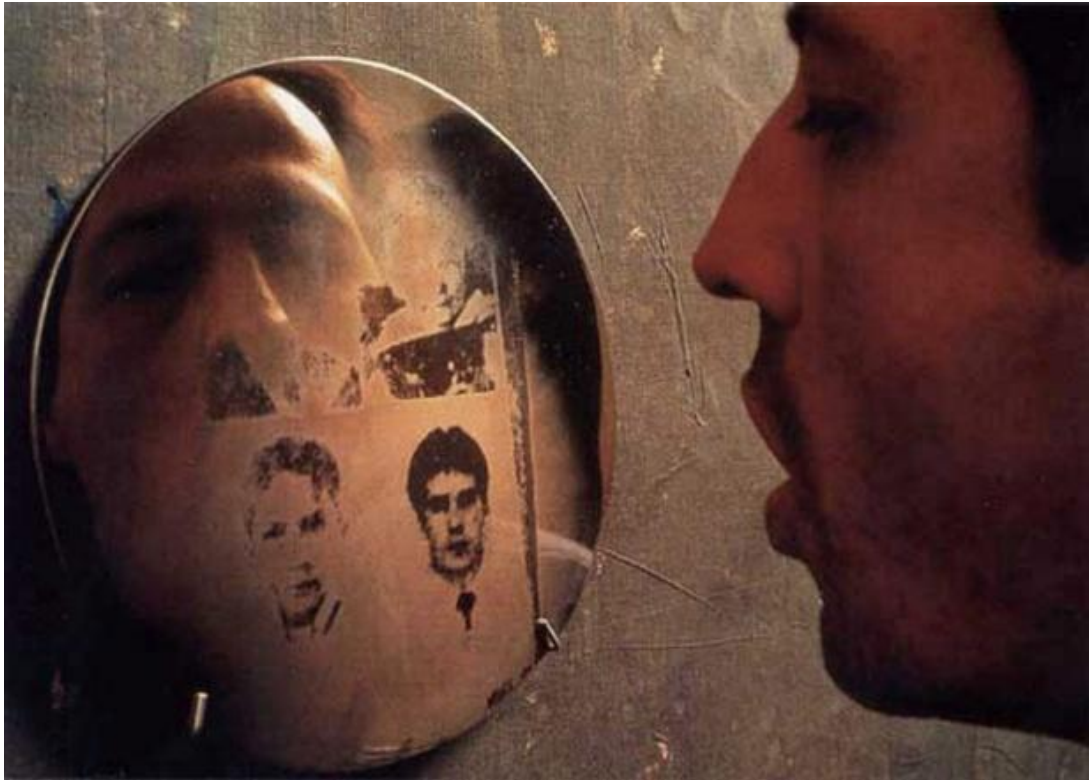


Fig. 1 Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1996-2002)



Fig. 2 Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos* (1994-95)

Theoretical framework

This essay approaches photography not as a neutral technology of preservation, but as a field in which memory is produced through absence, temporality, and material instability.

1. Trace and Indexical Instability

Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace provides the foundational ontological structure for this instability. For Derrida, presence is never fully present to itself, but always marked by absence, deferral, and temporal displacement. The trace "has no being in itself," but exists only in relation to what is no longer or not yet. (Derrida, 2010)

Within this framework, the photographic image cannot be understood as a self-identical record of presence. Instead, it is a structure in which visibility depends on what withdraws from it. The image does not preserve presence; it exposes the fact that presence is already compromised by absence. This destabilisation is materially enacted in Muñoz's work. What appears in photography is therefore not presence itself, but the effect of its continual deferral. This is crucial for Muñoz's practice, where images do not stabilise memory but stage its disappearance as a condition of appearance. The trace is not something that remains after loss, but the condition through which loss becomes perceptible in the first place.

Roland Barthes' formulation of the photograph as the "that-has-been" introduces a second, more explicitly photographic layer of indexical tension. For Barthes (1982), the photographic image confirms the existence of a past reality. The photograph thus secures memory by guaranteeing that something has existed in front of the camera. However, this certainty is immediately destabilised: the photograph does not restore presence but marks its irreversible loss. As he writes in *Camera Lucida*, "The Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."

(Barthes, 1982, p.4) The image operates within a paradox, simultaneously affirming presence and registering absence.

Susan Sontag (1977) sharpens this contradiction further by describing the photograph as “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag, 1977, p. 12), emphasising that photographic meaning depends on a structural oscillation between what is shown and what is no longer available. In this sense, photography does not resolve the tension between presence and absence but sustains it as its basic condition of intelligibility.

In Muñoz’s work, this indexical logic is pushed beyond its limits. The image no longer stabilises even the fragile certainty of the “that-has-been” (Barthes, 1999) because it does not endure long enough to function as evidence in any sustained sense. Instead, photography becomes a site in which the conditions of evidentiality begin to collapse. Memory is no longer anchored in the image as a stable referent, but exposed as a fragile, intermittent, and temporally unstable effect of perception that the photographic surface itself cannot guarantee.

2. Duration and Perception

Henri Bergson’s concept of duration introduces a fundamentally different understanding of time, one that destabilises the idea of discrete, measurable instants. For Bergson, time is not composed of separable units but unfolds as a continuous qualitative transformation. Perception is therefore never static but embedded in movement and change, meaning that the image is internally temporal rather than spatially fixed (Bergson, 2005).

As Bergson writes, “to perceive consists in condensing enormous periods... into a few more differentiated moments of an intenser life” (Bergson, 2005, p. 208). What appears as a single moment is in fact a contraction of ongoing temporal flow in which

past and present interpenetrate. The instant is therefore never singular, but structurally composite.

This undermines the idea of photography as a pure extraction of the instant since the instant itself is structurally composite rather than singular. The photographic image can no longer be understood as a frozen moment extracted from time, but as a condensation of temporal processes. It does not capture time; it reorganises it as perception.

In Muñoz's work, this condensation becomes visible as instability: the image does not hold time still but reveals its continuous unfolding, in which visibility is inseparable from processes that exceed the moment of perception. Duration, therefore, reframes memory not as storage, but as ongoing temporal activity. Memory is not contained within the image but produced through its unfolding as a process of temporal formation rather than a preserved content (Bergson, 2005).

3. Temporal Fragmentation and Experience

Byung-Chul Han (2017) diagnoses contemporary temporality as fragmented, discontinuous, and "atomised," in which time is no longer experienced as a coherent flow but as a succession of isolated moments. Temporal experience is therefore structured through discontinuity rather than linear progression.

For Han, this transformation has direct consequences for memory. Without temporal continuity, memory can no longer stabilise into a coherent structure but is dispersed across transient and disconnected moments. As he argues, "narrative time is no longer possible in a world that is dominated by the present" (Han, 2017).

Han thus describes a condition in which temporal experience is organised through fragmentation rather than integration. Memory, under these conditions, ceases to function as a coherent structure of retention and instead becomes a set of disconnected temporal fragments that resist synthesis into a unified whole. However, this account remains primarily phenomenological: it describes how time is experienced and circulated, rather than how instability is materially embedded within systems of representation themselves.

4. Entropy and Material Process

Robert Smithson (1966) provides the final framework through which these conditions converge. Originally a thermodynamic principle describing movement from order to disorder, entropy can be understood as governing material and temporal systems. Smithson extends this into the cultural field, where form is no longer preserved but continuously reorganised through decay, and stability becomes untenable.

He further suggests that modern “new monuments” no longer stabilise memory across time but collapse temporal distinctions, placing past and future within an unstable present. Within this framework, the photographic image can no longer be understood as a fixed form, but as a temporary organisation of matter and perception within irreversible change, where what is recorded is always already subject to material transformation rather than preservation.

Read through entropy, photography becomes a system of controlled instability rather than preservation. The image appears as a temporary suspension of processes that are always already in motion. What is visible is not permanence, but a momentary configuration of forces that cannot be stabilised, meaning that photographic form is structurally dependent on the very processes that undo it.

At its most extreme, Smithson frames this condition as cosmological rather than merely cultural, where entropy extends beyond individual systems into universal dissolution: “the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness” (Smithson, 1966). In this sense, photographic form is no longer positioned against decay but embedded within the same irreversible trajectory toward homogeneity and loss of distinction.

This framework becomes materially operative in Muñoz’s practice, where the photographic image is not detached from physical processes but embedded within them. Memory is no longer understood as accumulation, but as continuous transformation, produced within instability rather than preserved against it, so that photographic persistence becomes indistinguishable from material change itself.

Entropy, therefore, does not function as a metaphor but as a structural condition of image formation. It describes how photographic systems operate when they are no longer anchored in permanence but in transformation, where visibility is always a temporary stabilisation of irreversible processes of change.

Taken together, Derrida’s trace, Bergson’s duration, Han’s fragmentation of temporality, and Smithson’s concept of entropy articulate a shared condition in which the photographic image can no longer be understood as a stable repository of memory. Instead, it emerges as a process in which presence is continuously undermined by temporal and material transformation. Stability is therefore not an inherent property of the image, but a temporary effect produced within unstable systems of perception, matter, and time.

Within this field of instability, Óscar Muñoz’s *Aliento* and *Narcisos Secos* do not illustrate theory but operate as its material realisation, where memory appears only through conditions that simultaneously undo its persistence.

Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento*.

Óscar Muñoz's *Aliento* [Breath] (1996–2002) reconfigures the photographic image as a contingent, embodied, and temporal event rather than a stable visual object. The work consists of polished metallic discs onto which portraits of disappeared individuals are inscribed in a thin layer of grease. In their default state, the surfaces appear blank or purely reflective, offering no stable image. Only through the viewer's breath does condensation briefly render the image visible, before it evaporates almost immediately, returning the surface to reflective indistinction. *Aliento*, then, constructs the photographic image not as a representation of memory, but as a temporal event in which visibility is structurally dependent on disappearance.

In this structure, the image does not pre-exist perception but is generated in the moment of encounter and simultaneously withdrawn. Visibility and disappearance are structurally co-constitutive. The photograph is no longer an object that endures through time, but a temporal event that exists only as an unstable threshold between emergence and erasure. This displaces photography from its traditional ontological status as a record toward a condition in which it becomes indistinguishable from its own disappearance.

The viewer's breath functions as the activating condition of the image. It introduces duration, materiality, and bodily expenditure into perception itself. Seeing becomes inseparable from breathing.

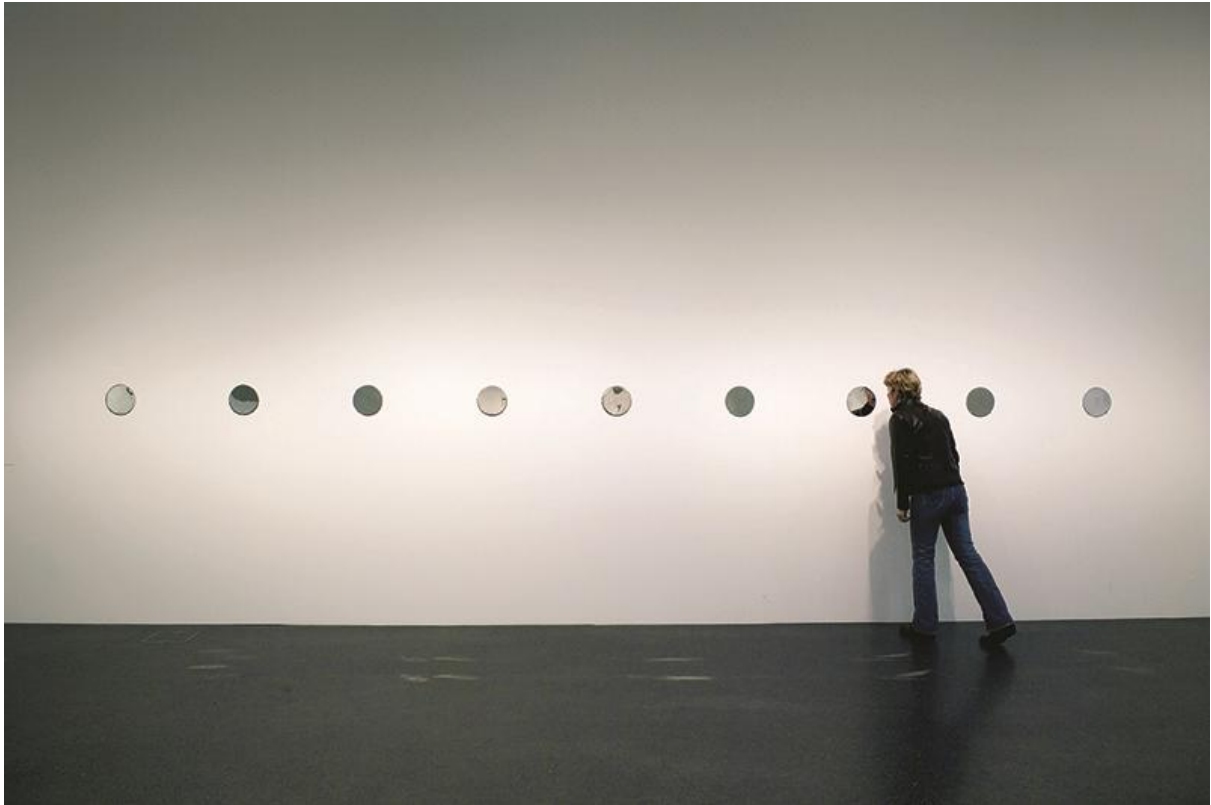


Fig. 3 Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1996–2002)

This aligns with Henri Bergson's conception of duration, in which experience is never static but continuously unfolding. In *Aliento*, breath operates as lived temporality, producing visibility through process rather than instant. The image emerges within duration rather than outside it.

Muñoz himself articulates this condition in terms of fragility and incompleteness, stating that "*impresiones débiles... no llega completa... entre olvido y recuerdo*" [weak impressions... it does not fully arrive... between forgetting and memory] (Blanton Museum of Art, 2026). This formulation condenses the logic of *Aliento*, where perception never achieves full presence but remains structurally incomplete, suspended between emergence and disappearance.



Fig. 4 Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1996-2002)

Isabella Vergara (2021) extends this reading by arguing that Muñoz relocates photographic indexicality within breath as a temporal and relational medium. Breath does not simply activate the image but reorganises photographic time, shifting it from a fixed before-and-after toward an ongoing “is being” that exists only within the viewer’s encounter (Vergara, 2021). In this sense, the image is not extracted from time but produced through temporal participation.

However, Muñoz pushes this condition further by rendering duration unstable. The same act that produces visibility simultaneously initiates its dissolution: moisture condenses the image while also beginning its evaporation. Perception is therefore inseparable from disappearance, and the image can only exist as a threshold between emergence and erasure.

Within this unstable structure, Jacques Derrida’s concept of the trace provides a critical framework. For Derrida, the trace is never self-present but exists only in

relation to absence, deferral, and temporal displacement. It “has no being in itself,” but is constituted through what is no longer or not yet.

In *Aliento*, the portraits operate precisely as traces in this sense. They do not restore presence to the disappeared, nor function as recoverable images of identity. Instead, they appear only as temporary interruptions within visibility, always structured by their own withdrawal. The image does not stabilise the subject; it exposes the conditions under which any presence is already compromised by absence, rendering identity structurally provisional rather than recoverable.

The reflective metallic surface intensifies this instability. It does not function as a neutral support but as an active field of displacement in which reflection, condensation, and erasure overlap. The viewer’s own image briefly appears before being replaced by another face, producing a reversible structure of identity in which self and other are continuously destabilised.

This destabilisation extends to the logic of photographic indexicality. Roland Barthes (1982) describes photography as the “that-has-been,” a form that guarantees the existence of what it depicts. However, in *Aliento*, this guarantee collapses. The image does not persist long enough to function as evidence and cannot stabilise into archival certainty. Instead, the “that-has-been” becomes paradoxical: it exists only as a fleeting appearance that immediately negates itself. Photography no longer confirms presence but exposes its fragility as a temporal condition.



Fig. 5 Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1996-2002)

Susan Sontag's formulation of photography as "a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (Sontag, 1977) becomes more extreme here. In Muñoz's work, presence is not simply accompanied by absence; it is produced as disappearance. The image is not a record of what was, but a system in which appearance and erasure are structurally indistinguishable.

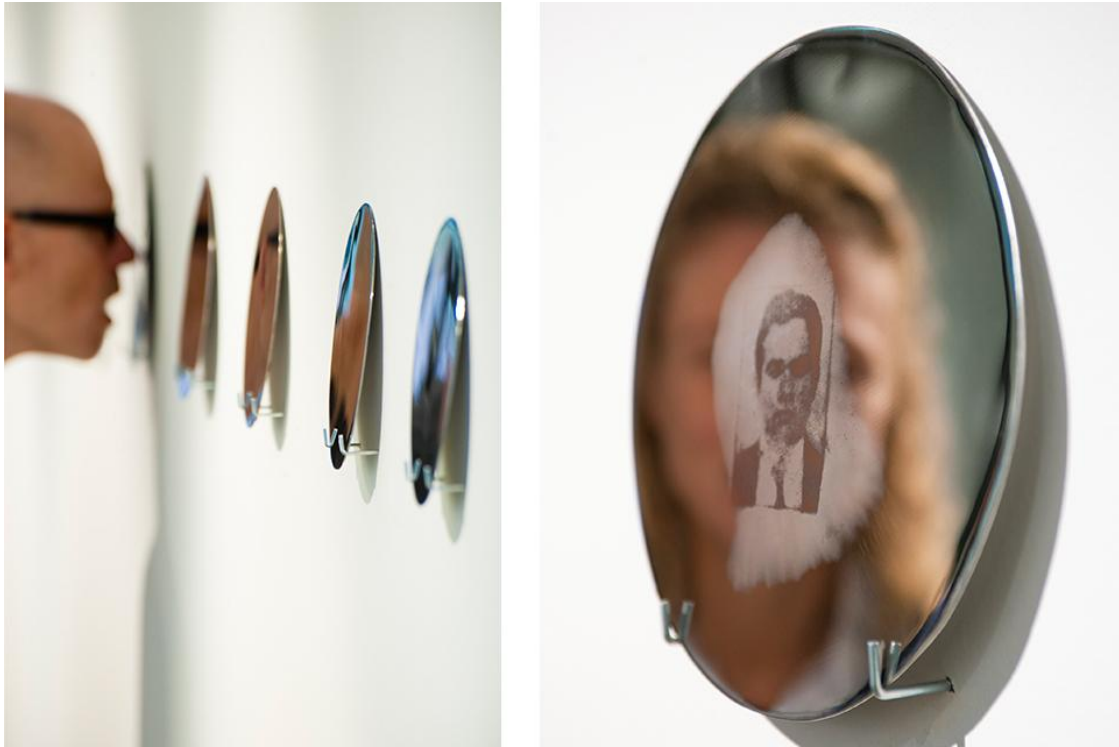


Fig. 6 Óscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1996–2002)

Muñoz explicitly frames *Aliento* as an encounter between self and other. As he states:

Cuando se empaña la imagen con tu aliento, tu imagen se borra, dejas de existir, y es alguien más... hay una confrontación entre la propia vida y la de otro [When you mist up the image with your breath, your image is erased, you no longer exist, and it is somebody else... there is this confrontation between one's own life and that of another] (Blanton Museum of Art, 2026).

This reveals that the work operates not only as a formal investigation of temporality, but as a structure of relation in which perception produces a temporary displacement of identity: the emergence of the other coincides with the disappearance of the self.

Memory here is not individual possession but relational instability. The self is not positioned against the other but momentarily entangled within a shared field of

appearance and loss. Memory becomes an intersubjective event structured through substitution rather than retention.

This relational instability is inseparable from the historical context of the work. *Aliento* indirectly engages with the disappearance of individuals during the Colombian armed conflict but resists documentary representation. It does not restore the disappeared as stable images or archivable identities. Instead, disappearance is staged as a condition of visibility itself. The figures do not return as recoverable presences but appear only within conditions that immediately erase them again, preventing any stabilisation of commemorative form.

Entropy provides the material logic through which these conditions are organised. The system of *Aliento* follows a simple irreversible sequence: breath introduces moisture; moisture produces visibility; visibility dissolves through evaporation.

Here, entropy is not metaphorical but operational. The image exists only within a loop of emergence and decay that cannot be halted or stabilised. It is not destroyed externally; it is structurally incapable of persistence. Visibility is always already oriented toward disappearance, as its constitutive condition.

This produces a condition in which photographic representation is fully embedded within material time rather than standing apart from it. The image does not resist time; it is constituted through it.

Unlike fragmented contemporary temporality described by Byung-Chul Han (2017), *Aliento* produces a suspended and intensified temporal condition. The viewer cannot consume the image instantaneously; they must remain within its fragile duration. This generates a form of attentional suspension in which perception is slowed to the threshold of disappearance. Time becomes perceptible not as

continuity but as vanishing. The image exists only long enough to expose the instability of seeing itself.

In conclusion, *Aliento* demonstrates that the photographic image cannot function as a stable site of memory or representation. Instead, it exists as a temporal event structured by the inseparability of appearance and disappearance. Memory is not contained within the image but produced through the material and temporal conditions that simultaneously generate and erase it.

Through this, Muñoz transforms photography into a field of entropic encounter in which visibility is always contingent, and perception is structurally bound to loss. The image is no longer what is seen, but what briefly happens before vanishing.

Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos*

Óscar Muñoz's *Narcisos Secos* derives from a small identification photograph of the artist, mechanically reproduced through silkscreen, and placed within shallow Plexiglas boxes lined with collaged paper before being filled with water and carbon powder. As evaporation occurs, the system triggers a slow redistribution of material in which carbon particles pass through the silkscreen matrix and settle unpredictably onto the surface below, producing each image as a singular configuration governed by contingency rather than authorial control.



Fig. 7 Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos* (1994-95)

This process displaces photography from indexical stability—where the image functions as a fixed trace of a prior moment—and instead, reconstitutes it as a contingent material field in which formation and dissolution occur simultaneously. Mechanical reproduction is destabilised by environmental forces such as evaporation, gravity, and particulate drift, which actively determine the image. Coherence emerges only as a temporary equilibrium within continuous transformation, where sedimentation and dispersal are inseparable processes.

Crucially, the work incorporates processes that exceed the artist's control. Evaporation, humidity, and environmental conditions actively shape the image's duration and form. As Muñoz explains, "there is a process that I can no longer control... a sort of metaphor for creation, of life and death" (Muñoz, quoted in Malagón-Kurka, 2019). The image is therefore not simply made; it is subjected to the same temporal forces that govern living bodies.

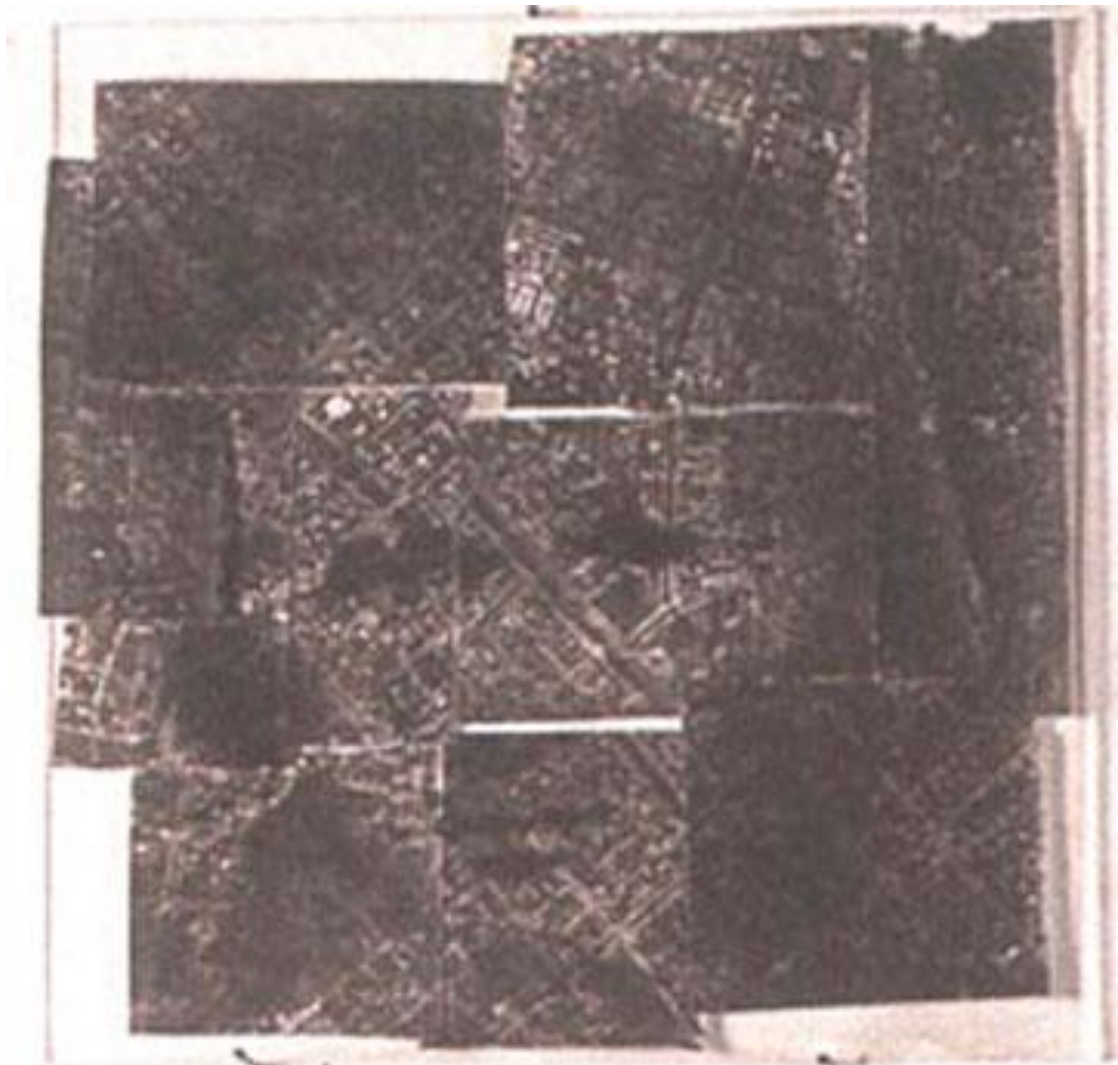


Fig. 8 Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos* (1994-95)

Produced in the context of the Colombian conflict of the mid-1990s, the work intensifies this condition by situating fragile processes of image formation within a

historical field marked by disappearance, where representation is continually assessed against the limits of persistence.

Narcisos Secos extends the logic of *Aliento* by relocating instability from perceptual activation into the material constitution of the image itself. Where *Aliento* depends on encounter and breath, here, instability is no longer triggered by perception but embedded within the production of the image. This marks a shift from photography as event to photography as system: instability is no longer momentary but structural.

Unlike conventional photographic portraiture, where identity is secured through fixation, *Narcisos Secos* refuses any stable point of reference. The portrait does not appear as a finished image but as the outcome of sedimentation, in which dispersed carbon particles gradually form a provisional configuration. This form is never resolved: accumulation and dispersal operate simultaneously within the same field, preventing any final stabilisation of the image. The portrait exists as a material becoming shaped by the redistribution of matter.

The work does not depict time but materialises it. The portrait emerges as a gradual configuration of particles rather than an instantaneous capture. What becomes visible is not a stable figure, but a temporary organisation of matter within ongoing transformation. This aligns with Henri Bergson's conception of duration, in which "real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing." Muñoz himself reinforces this material agency, stating that "*el soporte... no es pasivo... interviene expresivamente*" [the support... is not passive... it intervenes expressively] (Blanton Museum of Art, 2026). In *Narcisos Secos*, identity is not represented but materially produced through this transference, where form arises only through temporal-material change.



Fig. 9 Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos* (1994-95)

At this point, Roland Barthes' notion of the photograph as the "that-has-been" becomes insufficient. In *Narcisos Secos*, the image does not stabilise long enough to function as evidence. What persists is not photographic presence but material residue—carbon traces that register photography as process rather than record. The work exposes the impossibility of photographic certainty under conditions of continuous transformation, where presence is only ever provisional.

Within this framework, Jacques Derrida's notion of the trace becomes materially operative. The image does not preserve presence but exists only through deferral. However, in *Narcisos Secos*, deferral is no longer conceptual but material, occurring through dispersion, evaporation, and gravitational movement. The portrait does not signify identity but records the conditions under which identity cannot stabilise.

Material processes are therefore constitutive of the image. Water, evaporation, gravity, and carbon drift function as active agents that determine both formation and dissolution. Entropy is not metaphorical but structural: every moment of legibility is inseparable from the processes that undo it, and every appearance is already embedded within irreversible transformation.

The title *Narcisos Secos* further intensifies this instability by invoking the myth of Narcissus, traditionally associated with reflection, self-recognition, and the fixation of identity within an image. In classical terms, Narcissus is immobilised by his own reflection, captivated by a stable visual form that guarantees the coherence of the self. Muñoz inverts this logic entirely. Reflection is no longer a site of recognition but a process of disintegration.



Fig. 10 Óscar Muñoz, *Narcisos Secos* (1994-95)

The self-portrait does not return a unified image but dissolves into particulate matter, preventing any stable identification from taking place. Rather than confirming identity, the image exposes its material contingency. The “self” does not appear as a fixed referent but as a temporary configuration of dispersed elements that cannot sustain coherence over time. In this sense, *Narcisos Secos* displaces the photographic portrait from a structure of recognition into one of instability, where identity is not only fragmented but fundamentally non-recoverable.

What the work reveals is that photographic form cannot be separated from material instability. Where photography traditionally depends on fixation, Muñoz replaces it with continuous transformation. The portrait is not something preserved against time, but something that only briefly coheres within it. The image is no longer what resists time, but what is structurally indistinguishable from it—existing only as temporal-material fluctuation.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Óscar Muñoz reconfigures photography not as a stable repository of memory, but as a set of conditions in which visibility is structurally dependent on disappearance. Across *Aliento* and *Narcisos Secos*, this instability is progressively intensified: from an embodied, perceptual encounter in which the image briefly emerges through breath, to a systemic condition in which photographic form exists only as a temporary organisation of material processes already in flux.

Through Jacques Derrida’s notion of the trace, the photographic image can no longer be understood as the presence of what has been, but as a structure in which presence is always marked by absence and deferral. The image does not recover memory; it exposes memory as something that appears only through its own

withdrawal. Similarly, Henri Bergson's concept of duration destabilises the photographic instant, revealing it not as a fixed moment but as a contraction within an ongoing temporal flow. In Muñoz's work, this contraction does not stabilise the image but renders visible its continuous dissolution.

These frameworks prevent photography from being stabilised either as an indexical record or as a fixed material form. Instead, Muñoz exposes a condition in which photographic memory emerges only within temporal and material processes that simultaneously undo its persistence. Presence never fully consolidates, and the image remains irreducible to closure.

Rather than replacing photographic memory with instability, Muñoz demonstrates that the image is constituted precisely at the point where presence and disappearance become indistinguishable. Photography is thus no longer a medium of preservation, but a temporal and material process through which memory is continuously produced, destabilised, and lost.

This condition finds its most explicit articulation in *Narcisos Secos*, where the image survives only as the residue of its own disappearance. As Muñoz describes:

El resultado... es a la vez la imagen final y la muerte del proceso: los despojos de una fotografía que tuvo una vida después de haber sido fijada para la posteridad... el testimonio de una doble muerte de la imagen. [The result... is both the final image and the death of the process: the remains of a photograph that lived on after being fixed for posterity... the testimony of a double death of the image]. (Blanton Museum of Art, 2026).

Here, the photograph does not endure as evidence but persists as the remains of a process that has already undone it. What is preserved is not the image itself, but the trace of its disappearance.

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