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Photo: Maria Baranova

Living in the Fracture: Scores for our Last Audience

by Kristen Shahverdian

My packet of performance manuals arrives via FedEx.

Opening the large envelope, I expect a large book to come out—akin to an art book from a museum. Instead, I hold 5 small booklets, 4 white and 1 black, bound with clear plastic wrapping; they are Yanira Castro's *Last Audience: a performance manual*.

Bookending the manuals is a folded poster and a recipe card for Arroz con gandules. The first image I see on the poster is the painting, *The Last Audience of the Hapsburgs* (1918). Castro explains in her introduction that this unfinished painting, “captures this split in time,” a moment when the monarchy is about to end, but what will replace it is unknown.

Yanira Castro's company, [acanarytorsi](#), premiered *Last Audience* at [New York Live Arts](#) in the fall of 2019. “(A) set of unique scores written for each performance, the piece grapples with agency and manipulation, negotiating the individual and the collective inside a theatrical context.”

In 2020 Castro reimagined the performance in a virtual space for the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#). Alongside the creation of the [Last Audience: a performance manual](#), MCA Chicago hosted two [virtual performances/talks/dinners](#) in October and December of 2020. The MCA published these manuals to purchase as either digital downloads or, as I have them, printed booklets. Each manual holds scores to follow, making audiences into performers, collaborators, translators, and witnesses of the *Last Audience: a performance manual*.

When I open my poster, I see a collage of eyes drawn with a black sharpie on white cardboard. The eyes are cut out and overlapped on the page so that there are no empty spaces. Every eye is different-- some pupils are spirals, some look like spokes on a wheel, some tiny and some large. When I step back, and look at the poster, the lines, dots, circles, and curves take over and I no longer see each eye.

I pore through the materials in random order: The words jump out to me more than the instructions. LIGHT, SUPPLIQUE, DUST, PROSTRATE, TREMBLE. Serious, biblical words. These books become a sculpture on my desk, and I keep returning to them. I tell myself I should perform a score and then I get lost in what is held in each manual: a title, a quote, an intention, a preparation, a performance, and an archive.

You cannot expect to quickly begin your performances when following the manuals. It is not that they are complicated, but rather, like a recipe, it is best to read through the entire instructions before diving into action. For some of the scores you need to assemble objects. The preparation for the last score in the manual entitled *One Body*, tells you to "gather a collection of identically shaped paper objects." A group will then take these objects and work together (without speaking) to create a symmetrical design in a designated space.

Soundtracks for scores can be found online and participants can archive performances and upload them to the [Last Audience website](#).

I feel a combination of awe and stillness in reading through the materials. I read the scores, the intentions written by collaborators, the quotations by famous artists, and I mull over the instructions. I walk away, return, and repeat, starting at a different place each time. I decide this is okay; this is part of the process. Castro writes, "this is a manual for you to make a requiem, your *Last Audience*."

A requiem: a mass for the dead in the Catholic Church, a musical score that deals with death and dying, or a remembrance.

Intention, preparation, performing, archiving.

The scores are not solo affairs. Although I feel contemplative while reading them, the scores are communal. *One Body* states, "these scores are meditations. They cast the individual in assembly." These scores ask us to come into our bodies, to know mercy or judgement not intellectually, but within our bodies and with others.

Blessings are scores "for protection." Collaborator Pamala Vail writes in the intention for us to "Really see. All the eyes...It's bigger than you, the context of this thing..." The instructions are to make eyes, as many eyes as it would take to cover a human. There is a smaller replica of the cut-out eyes. The eyes are watching us, we are watching, watching over us.

I imagine people will engage with these materials differently. They could overwhelm. They demand time. The word devotion comes to me. The scores have a gravitas that feels right while living through a pandemic, a contentious presidential election, Black Lives Matter, and the Jan. 6 uprising at the Capitol, but I can also imagine creating these scores with joy and playfulness.

Last Audience: a performance manual speaks to this time when the past and present are exposed; how will we move into the future? Castro writes that "reckoning is judgement. It is a sharp divide in time. It makes a relic of our past." We cannot move forward until we reckon. Each manual is a path on that journey. The scores offer a way to create ritual, to take time, to embrace the unknown, to be with others, to commit with preparation and with intention.

Can I imagine what it would be like for thousands of people—a country even—to do these scores? To "write instructions that direct a person through the act of asking for mercy?" To embody those who have knelt before us—Colin Kaepernick, St. Francis of Assisi, Archangel Gabriel, civil rights demonstrators? (These are images in the *Mercy* manual).

Reading the manuals is labor; they are biblical in tone, word choice, and script. While reading I suspend deeper thoughts about religions as institutions, specifically Catholicism, and lean into the aura of religion: the ritual and mystery and its potential for creating community. In many ways the scores themselves sit between times: pulling from religious language a creation of scores that give us rituals to perform, in our homes, streets, and parks-wherever people can safely gather.

After reading the scores I am exhilarated and exhausted. But, reading is only the beginning. It is in the doing of these scores, in community with others, where the real work begins.

Yanira Castro, [*Last Audience: a performance manual*](#), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2020.

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February 12, 2021