

Cycle: White under Black

Works from the imperceptible / 3

Freya Powell

***I'll smile and I'm not sad*
and other past presents**

7.05–22.06.2014

FREYA
POWELL

SANTAMÒNICA

White under Black

Works from the Imperceptible

The blank page has been one of the great themes of the androcentric discourse of creation, nourishing Romantic imaginary and artistic modernity. Under the threat of nothingness and the void, the blank white sheet was a metaphor both of sterility and of creative autonomy. As such, it led modern subjectivity to the desire to conquer: to put black on white, to exploit the visual as the very core of the original artistic action.

The work of a number of women artists, having shifted away from this starting point of creation, has investigated other images of white. They neither make it the complement of black nor reverse the terms –white and black, white *on* black – but make a symbolic invention of great political potential: white under black.

This was suggested by the curator Catherine de Zegher when, in 1996, she gave the title 'The Blank in the Page' to one of the four sections in which she articulated the exhibition *Inside the*

Visible. An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine.

The blank deployed by De Zegher, through works and creative processes that incorporate the ellipsis, margins, silences, voids, error, doubt, indecision, stammering, interjection, discontinuities, absences... showed that there is a way to read the artistic practice of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has no need to confront contradictions in order to exist.

Forms of this blank are outlined in the photographs-cum-performances of Helena Almeida, in which the artist situates herself *behind* the pictorial support; in Gego's three-dimensional network structures, or in the performances of Lili Dujourie in the seventies, in which we saw the artist naked on the white sheets of a bed in female postures recalling famous paintings of art history. Other artists have also sought ways to make us feel this blank that often remains imperceptible, inaudible, as in the drawing/performance on paper that Elena del Rivero transformed into dishcloths of large proportions, or the schema underlying all of Agnes Martin's paintings.

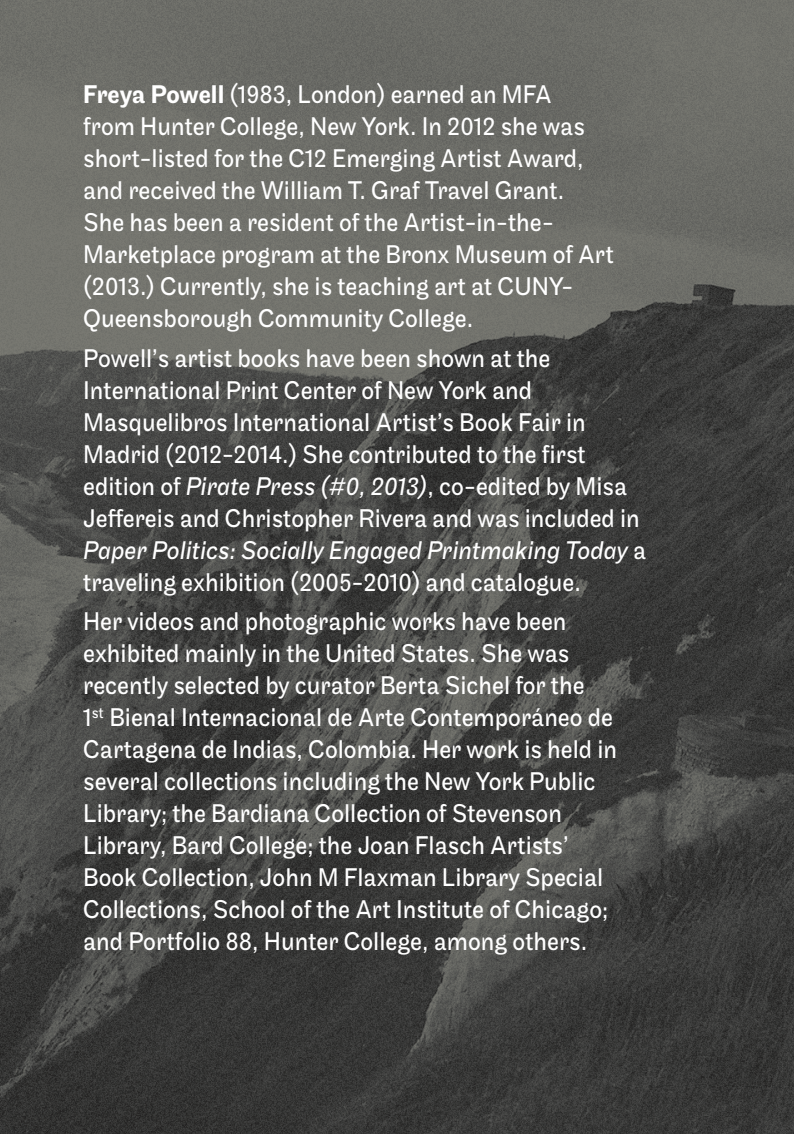
Patricia Bickers wrote, referring to Avis Newman's painting installations of the eighties,: 'In fact, the canvas is not empty, nor the page blank: there is no virgin territory. It is the awareness of

all that the canvas itself represents that holds the artist back.'

In this light, Marina Garcés, evoking Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, goes beyond thinking of the blank page as the paradigm of the project of modern autonomy to place the revolutionary space there: the space at once of birth and of politics; a space where Annarosa Butarelli writes about the tabula rasa in terms of a cut, a radical political movement that serves to 'make absence profitable'.

It is this creative space of making and politics that this series of exhibitions and conferences wants to explore, starting from the revealing title of a Blanca Casas Brullet catalogue, *White under Black*. Works such as those by Blanca Casas Brullet, Mar Arza, Freya Powell, Antònia del Rio, Isabel Banal and Mireia Sallarès sketch out new spaces for thinking, as Alejandra Riera said, without guarantees, an expansion of the available fields of vision and of doing.

Assumpta Bassas and Joana Masó



Freya Powell (1983, London) earned an MFA from Hunter College, New York. In 2012 she was short-listed for the C12 Emerging Artist Award, and received the William T. Graf Travel Grant. She has been a resident of the Artist-in-the-Marketplace program at the Bronx Museum of Art (2013.) Currently, she is teaching art at CUNY-Queensborough Community College.

Powell's artist books have been shown at the International Print Center of New York and Masquelibros International Artist's Book Fair in Madrid (2012-2014.) She contributed to the first edition of *Pirate Press (#0, 2013)*, co-edited by Misa Jeffereis and Christopher Rivera and was included in *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today* a traveling exhibition (2005-2010) and catalogue.

Her videos and photographic works have been exhibited mainly in the United States. She was recently selected by curator Berta Sichel for the 1st Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Her work is held in several collections including the New York Public Library; the Bardiana Collection of Stevenson Library, Bard College; the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection, John M Flaxman Library Special Collections, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and Portfolio 88, Hunter College, among others.

Freya Powell

Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.

"Beneath One Little Star" Wislawa Szymborska

Porque una lágrima es un asunto intelectual.

Elena del Rivero

Freya Powell lives and works in Queens, New York. She was born in England and moved to South Florida in 1994. She attended Bard College as an undergraduate and graduated from Hunter College in 2012 with an MFA.

The experience of working with Freya in my studio, the Paraclete, has been enriching for both of us. I have witnessed her grow into a mature artist since, after posting a quest for work on Facebook four years ago, someone suggested she write to me.

"I am most inspired by the intricacies of memory, notions of forgiveness, and loss... and language. And by other artists and writers and makers." (Freya Powell)

Freya is interested in memory and the passage of time. She is drawn to historical facts and how their recollection may affect the individual. This is the fountain of her inspiration and she utilizes visual and aural archival methods, among

others, to gather this information. Her practice aspires to and succeeds in bringing historical facts to our attention and to our intimate reality and she achieves this by incorporating her own experience into the work as well as that of others, who at her invitation contribute their own memories to her projects.

**“We all experience death, loss, moments of fragility and pure joy, notions of distance and intimacy. My challenge is to reconsider histories to shed light on the side of the memory rather than the document, to make space for the tears.”
(Freya Powell)**

Broadly speaking, her work has two very distinctive approaches: on one hand she uses strategies of abstraction and on the other she is interested in the realism of the social fabric around her. She produces ink and graphite drawings as an extension of self but also uses the recordings of sound as the waves in South England bathe the sands of the shores. Often she searches the social networks for unknown collaborators to participate in her vision of gathering collective memories, but she also delves into public-domain government archives in search of information.

And this is what she did for the single channel video *I'll smile and I'm not sad* (2012), where she collected the last words of Death Row inmates about to be executed. She moves, then, in an arena that seems to have no boundaries, but how does

she manage to articulate this information visually without being over-intellectual?

“I am not sure this umbrella of multi-media is a new movement, but it is definitely a distinct change - and yes, I do feel it allows for more freedom, and dynamic expression.” (Freya Powell)

Freya is a visual poet of the fragile. She challenges herself to get to the essence of things with few tools by editing her work to the minimum. To this end she employs strategies of minimalism. In this manner, she is able to articulate a pulsion that cannot be reduced to words, colour, numbers, lines or sound but is the compendium of them all. The work thus produced seems at times elusive, silent, and distant in the same manner as the work of a great poet like Emily Dickinson. Furthermore, she knows she runs the risk of passing unnoticed, but that is part of who she is and why it is important that her work is out there for us to enjoy the wonder and magic of her poetry.

“I hope that people will enjoy my work as a moment of pause, and that instigates conversation.” (Freya Powell)

Elena del Rivero

Freya Powell, *I'll smile and I'm not sad.* And other present pasts

Undoubtedly, the video installations in Freya Powell's first exhibition in Barcelona could be the starting point of a prolonged critical reflection on the problems of the archive, memory, repertoire, recording and the traces of history. In effect, this exhibition stretches a taut wire between the memory of Death Row prisoners in the USA, the memory of World War II, the artist's own memory and various different maps of the world produced under colonialism.

That said, the installation which gives its name to the exhibition, *I'll smile and I'm not sad*, a selection of the last utterances of prisoners awaiting execution in the Huntsville Unit of the Texas State Penitentiary, invites a kind of discursive withdrawal from the mass debates already articulated around the archive within artistic practice.

The theoretical horizon available on these issues – how to preserve the right to the secrecy of personal testimony (Jacques Derrida) in the face of the totalising will of the archive, which is currently one of the modes of the museum (Boris Groys), and the extent to which artworks that intervene in the archive differ from the construction of both

narratives and visuality by the atlas (Georges Didi-Huberman), among many other questions – it seems to be a little more than a kind of groundswell that assumes no centrality in the articulation of the series of installations.

Here, the only consistent gesture threading together the different projections of images and words about memory is ellipsis. In *I'll smile and I'm not sad* (2012), Freya Powell blanks out the proper names mentioned in the last words of those about to die; she elides all information of a personal nature, retaining only those phrases that refer unambiguously to this elliptical dimension: 'This is the end of this', 'It is what it is', 'This is the one', 'Let's get it over with', 'I can feel it coming'.

Similarly, in *Proximity* (2013) and *When I ruled the world* (2010) the maps of colonized territories that we see intermittently on the screen or on paper are taken directly from the Internet and purged of anything that could confer singularity on them.

It is a question, then, as Freya Powell writes, of perceiving them as 'simple forms', abstracted in order to produce 'few affective links in the viewer'. Here again, in relation to the elusive memories of the condemned, Freya Powell notes that a certain amount of time has to pass before we viewers can arrive at an affective experience and understand

that what we are reading are someone's last words, and it is precisely this drawn-out time of recognition that the artist explores.

It is then that these strategies of ellipsis, voiding or anonymity practised on collective archives – Internet, Google Maps, Lonely Planet or the open databases of public penitentiaries – alert us to the feebleness of our capacity to connect to and read the shared common memory.

And it is then that the question of the archive shifts towards the question of the link with the shared. As when Judith Butler speaks of the linking practice in Bracha L. Ettinger's countless notebooks, written and drawn to record testimonies gathered in Palestinian territory: 'a strange kind of linking, a temporally punctuated community'.

Joana Masó

I first saw Freya Powell's I'll smile and I'm not sad in Elena del Rivero's studio in New York a couple of years ago. The experience moved me.

Right away, the work triggered in me a rapid-fire battery of rhetorical questions in relation to human justice and divine ethics: what law allows the state to put the private words of Death Row prisoners in a file on the Internet, accessible to everyone? Why do Western democracies grant themselves authority over life and death? By what right do they legislate on the body? Beyond the questions, the emotion I experienced carried me back to a scene in the school theatre. I felt once again Antigone's rebellion against the law of Creon, in Jean Anouilh's version of the Greek tragedy by Sophocles set in Petain's France, a rebellion that I, at seventeen, pronounced as a gesture of adolescent self-assertion against my father's immovable certainties and my mother's paralyzing fears, which seemed to condemn me to death in life...

In the presence of *I'll smile...* I heard the voice of Antigone, only the figure of the girl in white declaiming in all her fury to fade as a new phrase from Freya Powell's video reached out to me.

The chained sequence of blacks opened up a new time tunnel that took me to the underground cave where another Antigone, María Zambrano's Antigone, meditated serenely. Just as there beneath

the black of Powell's projection, in Zambrano's Tomb of Antigone there are no heroes or heroines, just men and women of flesh and blood who enter and exit the space where the last meeting takes place.

In the video, the rhythm of the shots binds together the discrete phrases and creates a recitative. The exceptional nakedness of each line links it to the next and in the crescendo of the white that accumulates on the whites of our eyes there are the unburied bodies of history and I, with the silence of compassion and the blinking of my eyes, give them decent burial. For thousands of years women have searched for the corpses and buried the dead of wars and the 'justice' that men make, Annarosa Buttarelli writes, commenting on Zambrano's Antigone. This noble gesture reinstates sense because it 'restores to the world its livability', but is not in itself a political gesture. We must be able to 'name it from a non-external order', from that starting from the self that makes a place in the drama not only for others' stories but also and above all for us, with the commitment 'to symbolically eradicating war (violence) from the stage of history'.

Neither good versus evil nor the intimate truth of subjective consciousness is the core of the tragedy that Zambrano rewrote. When Antigone chooses to remain in the cave and speak to all those who have been important in her life, she

chooses loyalty to herself and the courage to put herself 'in the presence of significant, signifying relationships', as Buttarelli has written; the surrender of absolute self-reliance to dependence in relations of female authority.

In Freya Powell's work I find the courage of that delicate gesture. Faced with the tragedy of contemporary violence (both of men and of laws), the work chooses the strength needed to shift itself out of the order of discourse which guides the history of justice written by men. It is delicate because it engages with vital issues, those of the heart, and invites us to initiate ourselves in a practice of otherness in the highest sense, through empathy and compassion, far beyond an ethics of relations. Edith Stein and Etty Hillesum are two good writers to accompany us in reading the work of Freya Powell. Zambrano again gives us an invaluable clue when she writes that pity is 'knowing how to deal adequately with otherness'. That otherness that is real violence, which I am unable to explain to myself when it comes from men and women of my time, but also that otherness that is me.

Assumpta Bassas

3.30.2010

It is what it is.

I'll smile and I'm not sad, still photographs, single channel video,
56:03 (2012).

6.14.2000

It's going down, let's get it over with.

5.31.2000

I am ready to go home.

9.19.1991

I will carry your love with me.



All we have left are our memories, still photographs, single channel video, 05:16 (2014).







**Excerpts from the conversations between
Montse Romani and Freya Powell**

I'll smile and I'm not sad is a video based on the last words of Death Row prisoners in the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville; statements that have been catalogued online by the Texas Department of Justice. Assuming that these declarations voice the personal reflections of individuals just before their execution, how do you engage with what might be called 'narratives of death'?

When I came across this online public archive what surprised me most was this decisive sense that I read in the declarations. So it was this aspect – the readiness, the desire to go 'home' – on which I focused in this video. It really is the only case in which an individual knows exactly, precisely when they're going to die. This was a recurring theme or feeling in the last statements declarations. As a reader I really sensed this preparation.

It surprised me that these personal records of people who have been executed should have been recorded and classified to be publicly displayed; as if the state felt the need to register the disappearance. In this respect the anonymity that your work emphasizes gives a new meaning to the representation and the collective memory of these people. What editing strategies did you use?

I was careful when it came to deleting names

or the specific details of each case when I chose the statements. I was interested in the collective memory.

The repetition of phrases and feelings actively supported a collective experience. I also wanted the viewer to get a sense of the humanity of each speaker. The state does everything in its power to dehumanize; the anonymity of each declaration detaches each individual from their particular case and allows them to be seen as human beings.

Sara Ahmed has put forward the concept of 'affective economies' with which to explore the way certain feelings and emotions can be transformed into a common threat within the framework of discourses about fear, asylum and migration in nation-states. In this light, the figure of the prisoner is normally associated with the terrorist, the immigrant, or the 'other'. Although you excised the prisoners' personal information when you put together the video, it ultimately expresses a search for the most human and vulnerable aspect of each person. To what extent are these different considerations and uses of the 'emotions' (through national body and individual body) interconnected in your video?

It is interesting that you note how these Texas archives of final declarations are a medium for

registering disappearance. I have never understood why the state does this. The only thing I can think of it is that it does so from a sense of pride and ethics in what they see as a moral act. So encountering this emotive expression on the part of an individual that the state has subsequently registered causes a lot of perplexity of perplexity. While the state does everything it can to erase, this online archive and the video of collected feelings act as a trace.

What initially seems like a series of thoughts associated at random in the video I'll smile and I'm not sad immediately causes a sense of surprise in the reader. What do you think it activates – or you would like it to activate – in the viewer?

I'm interested in the moment of recognition. The video is put together in such a way that the viewer doesn't immediately know where the declarations come from, and through the experience of watching, reading and witnessing, the viewer becomes aware of the gravity of the words. This experience of revelation is what interests me, and I hope that through this the work will engender feelings of empathy in the viewer.

Some of your works speak of the violence of the state (the prison system, wars, colonialism, etc...). How do you think art can contribute to the debate about the memory of violence?

I think I have a vision that is at once cynical and hopeful. I don't think that art has a direct impact or the ability to bring about change. At best we can hope that it creates a space for thought, for dialogue, and a validation of experience.

There are two works in this exhibition in which I explore ideas of distance and involvement. *When I ruled the world* and *Proximity* look, respectively, at British and American colonies/territories and the number and proximity of countries that the Americans have bombed since World War II. Though it may seem playful, *When I ruled the world* dashes through the countries and territories governed by Britain and the U.S., implicating my colonial heritage as a British born American, with the intention of barraging the viewer with information. Although I involve myself directly, I hope that viewers will consider their own history

Omniscience and Oblivion is an archive created with the memories of a number of women living in Barcelona. They were asked two specific questions: What memory would you like to preserve forever? and what would you like to forget? What is the aesthetic and political specificity of the Omniscience and Oblivion?

Although this project is clearly conceived as an archive I'm not thinking of the concept of archive in the traditional sense. Archives contain data, surveys and maps and consist of documents, etc,

while this project leans more towards a 'repertoire' that, coming from the body, is based on transmission and has ephemeral qualities. The repertoire comes from the cultural and social and is collected in the form of words. As this project exists as a sound installation, the audience/viewer experiences the memories in the moment. Sound is an intangible medium and for the viewers it will be an ephemeral experience, which will then exist in their memories.

Omniscience and Oblivion reflects and represents a particular pair of memories. What is interesting is that they are memories chosen for this project within the context of the collection as a whole. Each individual memory has connections and runs parallel with other unknown persons within a larger space or consciousness.

Here again, as in I'll smile and I'm not sad, here is an emphasis on anonymity in producing the repertoire Omniscience and Oblivion. Why?

I think the anonymity offered in this project affords the participant a measure of personal freedom. So, while the specific identity of the participants is unknown to the viewer/receiver of the work, each memory is part of a larger corpus of memories, each with its own eccentricities and parallels. The production of memory may be discursive, but each participant chooses to put forward private memories that are not random.

I keep returning to anonymity to allow the memory or statement to exist on its own, have power on its own, before it is attached to a specific person. Without the link to an individual they can be viewed, understood and experienced as part of a collective. The viewers can imagine that it was their memory, their declaration, because they are not linked to a specific identity or a specific history. The viewer can empathize.

Many of your works explore the intimate and the private versus the public through the relationship between the word, the space, memory and oblivion. Why do you find it necessary to seek a sense of distance within the personal and the political? Can you define the significance or the use of the notion of distance in this context?

Distance is something I'm always grappling with personally. In these works I think the sense of distance reaches the viewer at the moment of revelation. It may take viewers some time to realize that they're reading the last words of people about to be executed in *I'll smile and I'm not sad*. In this lapse of time they will have empathized with the human experience before they understand who is speaking, so that here the distance is minimal, the unknown becomes more known, while in works such as *When I ruled the world* the viewer is bombarded with an unfathomable amount of information and thus the sense of

distance from the known is greater. When I speak of distance, or work with that idea, I think it can be applied to a lot of situations, and really speaks of the known versus the unknown. The known is that which is present, that which is tangible, that which is accessible and comfortable, while we find the unknown in the categories of that which is distant, that which is future, that which is 'other'.

Cycle: White under Black

Works from the imperceptible

Blanca Casas Brullet

28 January –
2 March 2014

Mar Arza

11 March –
20 April 2014

Freya Powell

7 May –
22 June 2014

Antònia del Rio

1 July –
14 September 2014

Isabel Banal

23 September –
16 November 2014

Mireia Sallarès

25 November 2014 –
11 January 2015

Related Activities

Friday 9 May, 5.30 p.m.

IX Magisterial Dialogue with Mireia Bofill Abelló: Decades of Feminism: From My Practice of Relationship

Facultat de Geografia i Història, UB. C/ Montalegre, 6, Barcelona.

Saturday 10 May, 10.15 a.m.–5.30 p.m.

XXV DUODA Seminar: Is Women's Pain Already Political? With Cori Mercadé, Pilar Babi Roureda and Gemma Martino.

Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó. C/ Comtes, 2, Barcelona.

Monday 26 May, 5.30 p.m.

A talk by Jean-Luc Nancy: The Community Revoked

MACBA Auditorium. Jointly organized by MACBA, Arts Santa Mònica, IFB-Institut Francès de Barcelona and Centre Dona i Literatura. Gènere, sexualitats i crítica de la cultura.

Activities

Wednesday 7 May, 7.00 p.m.

Opening

Thursday 8 May, 11.00 a.m.-
6.00 p.m.

Entremestres workshop with the artist ((in English)

Free registration from 21
April to 6 May by email to
entremestres@gmail.com

Limited number of places:
group of 25 people

More information at: [http://
entremestres.blogspot.com.es](http://entremestres.blogspot.com.es)

Saturday 10 May, 11.00 a.m.

Guided visit with the artist (in English)

Tuesday 13 May, 7.00 p.m

A talk by Annarosa Buttarelli: *Tabula rasa* and *Anarché: Women's Generative Thinking*

The Italian philosopher of
the Comunità filosofica
Diotima and professor at
the University of Verona
(Italy) proposes the thinking
of a science and a creativity
based on the teachings
of Carla Lonzi and María
Zambrano. On the one hand,
trusting in presence and
experience in the present;
on the other, situating
us beyond historical
mediations.

The series of talks and
workshops will take place in the
Main Hall at Arts Santa Mònica,
La Rambla, 7, 08002 Barcelona.

Wednesday 17 June, 7:00
p.m.

**A talk by H el ene Cixous
and a dialogue with the
artist Roni Horn.**

**In conjunction with the
Fundaci  Joan Mir  and
“la Caixa” Foundation**

The talk by writer and
philosopher H el ene Cixous,
one of the historic figures
of French feminism and
author of the influential
essay *The Laugh of the
Medusa*, will be followed
by a conversation with the
artist Roni Horn, winner of
the 2013 Joan Mir  Prize
awarded by the Fundaci 
Joan Mir  and “la Caixa”
Foundation. The dialogue
will be chaired by the critic
Eric Prenowitz.

The proceedings will be in
English, with simultaneous
translation.

The series of talks and
workshops will take place in
the Main Hall at Arts Santa
M nica, La Rambla, 7,
08002 Barcelona.

Course: Els Juliols UB

White under Black.
Unfolding the political
significance of the blank in
female creation.

Course registration from 19
May at www.ub.edu/juliols

White under Black. Works from the imperceptible

is a programme of exhibitions and talks directed by Assumpta Bassas and Joana Masó.

In conjunction with Maria José González and Montse Romani.

Corrent altern / Alternate Current is a series of get-togethers, resonances and overflows related to the exhibitions which will be announced over the course of the programme.

The sessions in the programme **Entremestres: Visual artists and teachers** will be run by the participating artists especially for teachers.

With the support of:

Centre dona i literatura

UNESCO Chair in Women, Development and Cultures at the Universitat de Barcelona

DUODA Centre de recerca de dones, UB

IFB – Institut Francès de Barcelona

Xarxa de Biblioteques de la Generalitat de Catalunya

Consorci de Biblioteques de Barcelona

Els Juliols, UB

La Bonne – Centre de cultura de dones Francesca Bonnemaïson

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To Sindillar/Sindihogar, independent union of domestic workers.

To Rachel Frier for recording and editing the audio of women's memories. To Carmen Sanchis-Sinisterra for the Spanish translation of the phrases in *I'll smile and I'm not sad*, and especially to all of the women who by sharing their memories have anonymously taken part in the creation of the sound repository.

Arts Santa Mònica

Centre de la creativitat

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www.artssantamonica.cat

Free admission

Tuesday to Saturday from 11 h to 21 h

Sunday and holidays from 11 h to 17 h

Closed Mondays

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Departament de Cultura

1714 / 2014

SANTAMÒNICA