

# Las Hormigas/ The Ants

Pilar Mata Dupont

*Las Hormigas/The Ants* is an exhibition of new and recent work by Rotterdam-based Latinx artist Pilar Mata Dupont.

*Las Hormigas* is a focused presentation of Mata Dupont's ongoing investigation into her family's histories and often conflicting memories of 20th-century Argentina. Since 2013, Mata Dupont has been steadily forming a rich archive of interviews with the female members of her family. These oral histories become a basis from which to explore intergenerational interactions and collisions of memories, and the profound challenges of articulating personal and collective trauma.

“Listen. Listen to what they say, because the ants speak amongst themselves. They’re plotting, they’re organising, because they want to steal all our food. Listen, listen to what they say so we can prepare, and know how they will plan their attack.” – Pilar Mata Dupont, excerpt from *Las Hormigas*, 2022

*Las Hormigas* leads with a family saga. The story centres on a family relative, then a young girl, picnicking with her family on the banks of a river. Its idyllic beginnings soon give way to more sinister tones. Abandoned by her brothers and cousins who have gone to play, her father, a military officer, senses her loneliness and assigns her with an important task: to cut encroaching ants in half with her mother’s sewing needle to prevent them from stealing the family’s lunch.

This story provides an important, symbolic memory for the exhibition. While personalising the tender relationship the young girl had with her military officer father, it also serves as a sombre presage. The young girl would grow up to become a member of guerrilla groups during Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’. Ruling between 1976 to 1983, the Argentinian military junta kidnapped, tortured, and executed thousands of suspected ‘dissidents’, many of them in their late teens and early twenties. Mata Dupont draws a connection between the child’s task of systematically cutting ants in two with the paranoid, brutal acts perpetrated by the government, and with her relative’s

affliction many years later when – after years of hiding from the government – psychosomatic paralysis down one side of her body (triggered by extreme stress) transformed her into the metaphorical ant split in two.

The story of the ants reappears across *Las Hormigas*, Mata Dupont's exhibition at PICA and the title of a major new performance. The exhibition is the latest presentation of an ongoing project engaging with her family's histories and often conflicting memories of 20th-century Argentina. Spanning photography, film, and performance, the exhibition is based in memories and experiences, imaginings, and suspicions that have been shared with Mata Dupont by the female members of her family over a period of almost 10 years. In the titular performance, Mata Dupont interweaves their stories of political activism, exile, intergenerational conflict, and tensions with deeply personal reflections she has written during her collection of this material. This points to Mata Dupont's interest, not so much in providing accurate depictions of specific events from her family's history, but rather in exploring the unreliability of narrators – that is, how fragments of the past are recalled, distorted, and pieced together in the present.

The first iteration of the performance, *Las Hormigas*, took place at De Hillevliet with WET in Rotterdam in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The performance was titled *A Table Read* after a key stage of

pre-production in both film and theatre in which actors meet and read through the script for the first time – used by Mata Dupont to examine the performative nature of memory while evoking the collective, fragmentary truths collected through her research. *A Table Read* was performed by three actors who switched between identities and roles – sometimes performing as the artist, sometimes as the artist’s relatives, and at other times playing themselves as they attempted to piece together the sequences of events. The scenes were not ordered or performed chronologically but slid between different times and places, and as decided during the performance by the actors.

*A Table Read* appears in the exhibition as a two-channel video installation. The overall experience of viewing the film is one of dislocation. Edited footage of the live performance is intercut with rough rehearsal footage, the two projections at times displaying distinct cuts of footage, sometimes mirroring each other, and at other times extending across both screens. The insertion of opening and closing shots of the seated audience watching the live production adds another layer to our experience of viewing the film, as our concentration on the actors’ performance gives way to an awareness of the theatrical machinations occurring in the work.

*A Table Read* forms part of a larger installation and set for the series of live performances. The physical ‘apparatus’ of

theatre – the various equipment, props, stage pieces, and cues typically hidden backstage – is left on show, further foregrounding the sense of theatricality that is inherent to storytelling. As with *A Table Read*, *Las Hormigas* hinges on improvisation. Presented over several days, the written scenes are not fully memorised by the actors, but collectively debated and decided on in front of the audience, and in response to each others' physical, visual, and aural cues. As time passes and the fatigue of constant re-remembering and re-telling sets in, the audience becomes witness to increasingly marked fabrications and fragmentations inherent to traumatic memory, and how it manifests over long periods of time and geographical distances.

In an earlier body of work, *La Maruja* (2021), Mata Dupont turns to the memories surrounding the mysterious death of her great-great-grandmother.<sup>2</sup> On marrying into the Mata family, María Cristina was moved to their family ranch, 'La Maruja', which she would rename 'Destierro' (meaning exile). When her son Fito was just a young boy, he was taken from her and given to childless relatives. In the years that followed, María Cristina developed a painful bacterial illness – perceived as symptom of this traumatising experience – dying without seeing him again. Drawing on interviews Mata Dupont conducted with family members as well as tapes of historical interviews made by her father and grandfather, *La Maruja* presents a fractured narrative, confronting the cultural (mis)

translations, gaps, and fissures that prevent anyone from ever fully knowing and understanding their family lineage from afar.

Across the exhibition and between the fragmented moments and scenes, we find recurring thematic concerns; the politics of motherhood, migration, filicide, displacement, alienation, suffering, and illness. Argentina's complicated and troubled history lurks in the background as a cast of shifting characters takes centre stage. Despite the often traumatic and sensitive nature of the experiences and memories recounted, playful and surprising forms of absurdist humour emerge from within the constructed, looping sequences, small reminders that unreliable narration and creative interpretation are always present in the re-telling of the past. *Las Hormigas* ends, as only it could, with the sudden, surreal metamorphoses of the protagonists into ants, bearing witness to their own process of mutation.

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- 1 First performed on the 4 & 5 December 2021 at De Hillevliet/WET, Rotterdam, Netherlands.
  - 2 *La Maruja* was commissioned by Lauren Carroll Harris at Prototype. *La Maruja* is available to be seen in its entirety at: <https://youaretheprototype.art/la-maruja/>

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