

## Art in America

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REVIEWS May 1, 2019

### Alejandro Cesarco

BERLIN

at Tanya Leighton

by Emily Watlington

Alejandro Cesarco:  
*Learning the Language*  
(*Present Continuous I*),  
2018, video, 18  
minutes, 25 seconds; at  
Tanya Leighton.



Alejandro Cesarco's practice can be characterized as one of active reading, in which annotating, rearranging, translating, interpreting, and reframing existing texts and artworks are treated as creative acts. In "These Days," his latest show at Tanya Leighton, Cesarco emphasized the poetry latent in citation, considering the ways in which we form personal, intimate relations to beloved works and incorporate aspects of them into our bodily selves.

The exhibition centered on two videos that were projected on hanging screens. Both feature distinguished Latin American women scholars meditating on repetition, memory, and the process of learning through discussions of canonical figures who have influenced them. The eighteen-minute *Learning the Language* (*Present Continuous I*), 2018, is a portrait of the Argentinean pianist and musicologist Margarita Fernández, now in her nineties, who plays for the camera an andantino by Franz Schubert and "Pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas" by Manuel de Falla. The footage of the performance is interspersed with sequences in which a black screen displays English translations for a voice-over by Fernández. Her monologue weaves together reflections on music and aphoristic digressions: "The logic of repetition in [Schubert's andantino] follows the logic of memory: it sneaks in modifications without our realizing it, because that logic presupposes oblivion," Fernández says. "That which is mistaken for love, but is not quite love, that might be mistaken for freedom, or truth, and cannot even be remembered as it actually is."

At one point, the video features a close-up of Fernández's elegantly weathered and bony hands, a reminder of her decades of piano playing. Framed on the gallery wall adjacent to the screen was a photograph, *Margarita's Music Box* (*Spes Vitae*), 2018, of Fernández's sheet music for the de Falla piece. The papers are wrinkled and annotated, but in the video Fernández is playing from memory alone: her vision has begun to fade, and she can no longer read the score.

The second video, *Learning the Language* (*Present Continuous II*), 2018, considers the relationship between memory, desire, and repression. Reconceiving a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*, the fifteen-minute video shows Brazilian psychoanalyst, critic, and curator Sueli Rolnik and a student engaging in a discussion on the role of repetition in psychoanalytic practice while traveling together on a train. In response to her student's speculation that "admiration is a false form of memory," Rolnik explains that misremembering can be a way of protecting ourselves from the trauma of reality. She describes the influence of Godard's film as something she internalized so thoroughly that she still carries it in her body: for her generation, the film's representation of the Chinese Revolution "germinated to create different scenes"—first in their heads, then in their lives—during a period of brutal dictatorships in Latin America.

A wall vinyl, *Direction* (2019), displays a phrase, "force the moment to its crisis," from T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915). The enigmatic poem explores the paralysis that is often part of the creative process: the feeling that nothing is good enough, that everything has been done before. For Cesarco, the remedy to this paralysis is to use previous artworks and texts as fodder for the generation of new ones: he views the canon of past masterpieces less as a burden to be overcome than as a body of material to be learned from, discussed, and built upon.

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