
PHOTOSCULPTURE AND THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA: COUNTER-HEGEMONIC AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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Abstract: This article investigates photosculpture as a counter-hegemonic aesthetic strategy that reconfigures dominant emotional regimes of nostalgia within contemporary visual culture. By extending photography beyond its historically dominant notions of flatness and indexicality into sculptural, material, and spatial dimensions, photosculpture unsettles affective narratives that sustain heritage discourse, colonial romanticism, and nationalist sentimentality. Focusing on contemporary artworks and my own artistic research into diasporic memory and Creole vernacular architecture, the study argues that the hybrid image-object of photosculpture generates both conceptual and sensory dissonance that challenges normative frameworks of feeling. Drawing on William Reddy's theory of emotional regimes (2001), Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia (2001), and Sara Ahmed's notion of affective reorientation (2004), the article positions photosculpture not merely as visual critique but as an affective and spatial practice for reimagining relations among memory, history, and belonging. As such, it contributes to current debates on photography's expanded materiality and proposes photosculpture as a critical modality within post-1970 visual and decolonial art practices that invite viewers to feel otherwise.

Keywords: PHOTOSCULPTURE; COUNTER-HEGEMONIC AESTHETICS; EMOTIONAL REGIMES; REFLEXIVE NOSTALGIA; MATERIALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

FOTOESCALTURA Y LA POLÍTICA DE LA NOSTALGIA: ESTÉTICA CONTRAHEGEMÓNICA EN LA PRÁCTICA ARTÍSTICA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Resumen: Este artículo investiga la fotoescultura como una estrategia estética contrahegemónica que reconfigura los regímenes emocionales dominantes de la nostalgia dentro de la cultura visual contemporánea. Al extender la fotografía más allá de sus nociones históricamente dominantes de bidimensionalidad e indexicalidad, hacia dimensiones escultóricas, materiales y espaciales, la fotoescultura desestabiliza las narrativas afectivas que sustentan el discurso del patrimonio, el romanticismo colonial y el sentimentalismo nacionalista. Centrándose en obras de arte contemporáneas y en mi propia investigación artística sobre la memoria diáspórica y la arquitectura vernácula criolla, el estudio argumenta que la imagen-objeto híbrida de la fotoescultura genera una disonancia tanto conceptual como sensorial que desafía los marcos normativos del sentimiento. Apoyándose en la teoría de los regímenes

emocionales de William Reddy (2001), el concepto de nostalgia reflexiva de Svetlana Boym (2001) y la noción de reorientación afectiva de Sara Ahmed (2004), el artículo posiciona la fotoescultura no solo como crítica visual, sino como una práctica afectiva y espacial para reimaginar las relaciones entre memoria, historia y pertenencia. De este modo, contribuye a los debates actuales sobre la materialidad ampliada de la fotografía y propone la fotoescultura como una modalidad crítica dentro de las prácticas artísticas visuales y decoloniales posteriores a 1970 que invitan a los espectadores a sentir de otra manera.

Palabras clave: FOTOESCALTURA; ESTETICA CONTRAHEGEMÓNICA; REGÍMENES EMOCIONALES; NOSTALGIA; MATERIALIDAD DE LA FOTOGRAFÍA

FOTOESKULTURA ETA NOSTALGIAREN POLITIKA: ESTETIKA KONTRAHEGEMONIKOA PRAKTIKA ARTISTIKO GARAIKIDEAN

Laburpena: Artikulu honek aztertzen du fotoeskultura estrategia estetiko kontrahegemoniko gisa, zeinak berregituratzen baititu nostalgiaren erregimen emozional nagusiak kultura bisual garaikidean. Argazkigintza bi dimensioko ohiko ezaugarritik eta indexikaltasunaren noziotik harago zabaldu eta dimentsio eskultoriko, material eta espazialtara hedatzean, fotoeskulturak desorekatu egiten ditu ondarearen, erromantizismo kolonialaren eta sentimentalismo nazionalistaren diskurtsoari eusten dioten narratiba afektiboak. Abiapuntu gisa hartuz arte-lan garaikideak eta memoria diasporikoari eta herri-arkitektura kreoleari buruzko nire ikerketa artistikoa, azterketak dio ezen fotoeskulturaren irudi-objektu hibridoak disonantzia kontzeptual eta sensitrial bat sortzen duela, zeinak zalantzaz jartzen baititu sentimenduaren esparru normatiboak. Oinarri harturik William Reddy-ren erregimen emozionalen teoría (2001), Svetlana Boym-en nostalgia gogoetatsuaren kontzeptua (2001) eta Sara Ahmed-en berrorientatze afektiboaren nozioa (2004), artikuluak aukeratzen du fotoeskultura ez soilik kritika bisual gisa, baizik eta, horretaz gainera, memoriaren, historiaren eta nongotasunaren arteko erlazioak berrimajinatzeko praktika afektibo eta espazial gisa. Hala, hauspotzen du argazkigintzaren materialtasun zabalduri buruzko egungo eztabaidea, eta fotoeskultura proposatzen du modalitate kritiko gisa 1970eko hamarkadaren ondorengo praktika artistiko bisual eta dekolonialen barruan, zeinek gonbidatzen baitituzte ikusleak beste era batera sentitzera.

Gako-hitzak: FOTOESKULTURA; ESTETIKA KONTRAHEGEMONIKOA; ERREGIMEN EMOZIONALAK; NOSTALGIA; ARGAZKIAREN MATERIALTASUNA

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1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of contemporary art, images no longer serve merely as mirrors of expression or instrument of representation; they operate as affective structures that organize and circulate feeling. Emotion, as William Reddy (2001) reminds us, is historically and culturally regulated-produced through what he calls emotional regimes. Within these regimes, nostalgia¹ often functions as a stabilizing force, smoothing over rupture, displacement, or loss by constructing an affective sense of continuity. Yet this emotional coherence often conceals histories of exclusion, colonial violence, and cultural erasure.

Photosculpture², as explored in both artistic and theoretical practice, introduces material and spatial disruptions that interrupt nostalgia's harmonizing function. While the term historically referred to nineteenth-century optical techniques, such as François Willème's cylindrical portraiture, the concept has undergone a significant redefinition in contemporary art³. Contemporary artists have reimaged photosculpture as a critical and affective strategy that mobilizes the expanded materiality of photography—its capacity to exist not only as an image but as a spatial, tactile, and temporal encounter. By doing so, it shifts photography from an indexical document toward a dynamic field of sensory and emotional negotiation.

This article situates photosculpture within a multidisciplinary framework that intersects visual culture, affect theory, and decolonial aesthetics. Drawing on theories of reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001) and affective reorientation (Ahmed 2004), it examines how contemporary artists—alongside my own photosculptural practice exploring diasporic place-loss and Creole architectural fragments—deploy material fragmentation, spatial tension, and tactile disruption to question inherited emotional narratives. In this context, photosculpture becomes both an analytical lens and a method of making that reframes nostalgia as an unstable, reflective process rather than a sentimental return.

Rather than affirming the coherence and emotional closure traditionally associated with photography, photosculpture produces affective dissonance through the encounter between image and object. The viewer's experience of surface, weight, and spatial incompleteness transforms nostalgia into an open-ended dialogue with memory and loss. These dissonant encounters, as I argue, are not merely aesthetic effects but counter-hegemonic gestures that expose how emotion is governed, naturalized, and circulated through visual form.

By engaging with the expanded field of photography—what scholars now refer to as ‘photographies’ to emphasize multiplicity and hybridity—photosculpture intervenes in dominant affective economies. It challenges the emotional scripts of heritage visuality and colonial romanticism that continue to shape how we see and feel the past. In doing so, photosculpture opens a critical space in which to reimagine the relations between image,

body, and history – a space where affect becomes a site of transformation rather than repetition.

2. Emotional regimes and the politics of nostalgia in visual culture

The historian William Reddy (2001, 122-123) defines *emotional regimes* as historically and culturally specific frameworks through which emotions are organized, regulated, and made intelligible within a given society. These regimes determine not only what can be felt, but also how, when, and by whom certain emotions may be legitimately expressed. In this sense, emotional regimes operate as mechanisms of social control, naturalizing certain affective orientations while marginalizing others.

Within this dynamic, visual culture plays a constitutive role. Images do not simply reflect emotions – they actively produce and distribute them, shaping how affect circuits across bodies, histories, and spaces. As Sara Ahmed argues (2004, 119), emotions «stick» to objects and signs through processes of cultural repetition, creating affective attachments that sustain social hierarchies. Through recurring conventions and aesthetic codes, images participate in this circulation, defining which emotions – and whose emotions – are recognized as legitimate or intelligible within a given context.

Among the most enduring and ideologically charged formations in visual culture is nostalgia. Originating in the seventeenth-century as a medical diagnosis for homesick soldiers, nostalgia has evolved into a pervasive affective logic mediating relationships to time, place, and belonging. As Svetlana Boym observes (2001, xviii), nostalgia today is less about memory's recovery than about its cultural performance: it reflects a «longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed». In visual culture, this longing manifests through recognizable aesthetic tropes – sepia hues, distressed surfaces, vernacular motifs – that evoke the past as a coherent and emotionally resonant domain. These images do not merely recall the past; they instruct viewers how to feel about it.

Boym's influential distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective nostalgia' provides a crucial framework for understanding these affective dynamics. Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct an idealized past, positing a return to origins and perceived continuities. This mode dominates hegemonic visual regimes: heritage photography; tourist imagery, and state-sponsored archives often reproduce sentimental visions of stability and belonging that align with national or colonial ideologies (Hutcheon 1998; Hall 1997). Within such frameworks, nostalgic imagery operates as an 'emotional technology of governance', transforming sites of rupture and loss into scenes of affective coherence.

By contrast, 'reflective nostalgia', acknowledges fragmentation and temporal rupture. It dwells in ambivalence rather than redemption, foregrounding the impossibility of return. In this mode, visual culture becomes a site of

'critical affect'—a space where feeling is not resolved but interrogated. Feminist and decolonial thinkers have extended this perspective by showing how emotion itself can be a terrain of political struggle. Ahmed (2004, 171) argues that affective reorientations occur when objects, images, or bodies refuse to comply with dominant emotional scripts, producing moments of dissonance that open alternative relations to history and power. Similarly, Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' (2011, 2) reveals how attachment to certain affective fantasies—such as home, coherence, or belonging—can hinder rather than enable transformation.

From this perspective, the politics of nostalgia in visual culture can be understood as a contest over how emotion is structured through aesthetic form. Hegemonic visual regimes depend on coherent, restorative affects—images that smooth over contradiction or loss. Counter-hegemonic practices, by contrast, generate reflective engagements with memory that are materially and affectively unstable.

It is within this critical terrain that photosculpture emerges as a particularly potent artistic strategy. By extending photographic images into three-dimensional, materially unstable forms, photosculpture challenges photography's historically dominant models of flatness, transparency, and optical immediacy. Its tactile surfaces, folds, and interruptions introduce what Laura Marks calls 'haptic visuality' (2000, 162): a sensory mode of viewing grounded in touch, proximity, and bodily resonance rather than detached observation. This shift complicates the affective clarity often associated with nostalgic imagery.

In recent years, theorists such as Geoffrey Batchen (2020) and Hito Steyerl (2012) have emphasized how contemporary *post-photographic* practices—ranging from installation to networked imagery—transform photography into an expanded, performative field. Photosculpture aligns with these developments by transforming the photographic image into a site of affective encounter rather than representation. Its hybrid form displaces viewers from the position of passive spectatorship and invites embodied negotiation with memory's instability.

By refusing the seamless coherence of restorative nostalgia, photosculpture aligns itself with reflective forms of remembrance. It stages the past as materially fractured and emotionally unstable, cultivating what Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart describe as the «affective instability of photographic materiality» (2004, 12). Through tactile disjunction and spatial fragmentation, photosculpture opens a field of encounter in which memory, loss, and longing remain unresolved yet active—felt as vibration, tension, or absence rather than narrative closure.

In this sense, photosculpture is not simply a critique of nostalgia but a reconfiguration of its affective conditions. It produces dissonance where heritage visuality seeks harmony, opacity where representation promises clarity, and multiplicity where identity demands coherence. By engaging with the expanded field of 'photographies', photosculpture transforms

nostalgia from a sentimental return into a critical mode of affective inquiry—one that exposes how emotion, power, and material form co-produce the visual politics of the present.

3. Photosculpture and the emotional reconfiguration of nostalgia

3.1. Disrupting visual coherence: Materiality and the politics of affect

Photosculpture destabilizes historically dominant conventions of photography by displacing its reliance on flatness, transparency, and indexical fixity. Through hybrid incorporation of three-dimensional forms, spatial layering, and tactile materials, photosculpture an encounter that is not purely visual but embodied, durational, and affectively disorienting. The introduction of folds, ruptures, and negative space disturbs the viewer's capacity to engage the image as a stable, referent, producing what Laura U. Marks (2000, p. 162) terms *haptic visuality*—a tactile mode of perception grounded in proximity and sensation.

While historically “photography” implied an optical correspondence between image and world, contemporary practices have pluralized it into what scholars call ‘photographies’ (Batchen 2020), acknowledging the field’s multiplicity and material instability. Within this expanded context, photosculpture offers not only a visual critique but an affective intervention. By undermining the emotional coherence that conventionally binds image, memory, and viewer, it compels audiences to navigate zones of material tension and perceptual uncertainty.

This reorientation resonates with Sara Ahmed’s (2004, p. 171) concept of ‘affective reorientation’, whereby bodies and objects that resist dominant emotional scripts open new trajectories of feeling. In photosculpture, the tactile, spatial, and precarious qualities of the image perform such resistance. The viewer’s encounter with uneven surfaces or suspended fragments generates what might be described as ‘affective dissonance’—a condition in which inherited emotional responses such as nostalgia or empathy are unsettled and reconfigured through embodied negotiation.

Through its expanded materiality, photosculpture thus transforms nostalgia from a static sentiment into a process of critical feeling. It makes palpable the fragility of memory and the instability of belonging, inviting reflection on how emotion itself is culturally produced. This section examines three case studies—Annette Messager, Letha Wilson, and my own work—to explore how photosculptural strategies operate as counter-hegemonic interventions within different registers of affect and memory.

3.2. Critical case studies: Contesting hegemonic memory through embodied form

Annette Messager: «My vows» (1988-91)

Annette Messager's «My vows» (1988-91, fig. 1) transforms photography into an immersive field of affective instability. The installation, composed of hundreds of small gelatin silver prints of fragmented body parts –eyes, mouths, hands– hangs from delicate strings within a circular formation. The dense accumulation of these suspended fragments evokes both an archive and a ritual structure, oscillating between tenderness and unease.

The repetition of dismembered imagery resists the traditional photographic impulse toward unity and permanence. Instead, Messager presents memory as dispersed and contingent, tethered to the body's vulnerability rather than to its idealized form. The viewer's movement around the work activates its fragile vertical structure, revealing shifting rhythms of light, shadow, and density that mirror the instability of emotional recollection.

Through these gestures, «My vows» enacts what Svetlana Boym calls 'reflective nostalgia' (2001)– a longing that acknowledges loss and impermanence. The installation's combination of craft materials, handwritten notes, and photographic fragments underscores the labor of care while simultaneously exposing its futility. Memory here is not preserved but suspended, trembling between affection and disintegration. Messager's photosculptural approach turns photography into an embodied encounter, where the act of remembering becomes tactile, fragmented, and alive.

Letha Wilson: «The moon wave» (2013)

In «The moon wave» (2013, fig. 2), Letha Wilson transforms the photographic image into a monumental sculptural form that bends, folds, and reshapes the conventions of landscape representation. A large digital print of a desert night sky–deep blue and punctuated by a faint moon–arches dramatically across the gallery space, supported by a white column that cuts through its surface. The curvature of the vinyl turns the image into an undulating plane, a landscape literally lifted into motion.

This sculptural manipulation interrupts the stable horizon central to traditional landscape photography. The viewer must move around the structure, their bodily perspective constantly shifting as the moon appears and disappears from view. The work demands physical engagement, replacing the distant gaze of contemplation with a spatial experience of tension and disorientation. In this way, «Moon wave» invites what Laura Marks (2000) describes as 'haptic visuality', where seeing becomes a form of touch.

By bending the image and incorporating architectural elements, Wilson collapses distinctions between image, object, and environment. The work

refuses the restorative nostalgia of the landscape tradition –the idealized vision of nature as timeless refuge– and instead enacts Boym's reflective nostalgia, which embraces fragmentation and uncertainty. As Hito Steyerl suggests (2012), contemporary images »crash into matter»¹, and «Moon wave» embodies this collision, transforming the photographic surface into a tactile site where memory, perception, and materiality converge.

Sunyoung Park: «*Bend don't break*» (2023)

My own photosculptural work «*Bend don't break*» (2023, figs. 3 & 4.) extends the counter-hegemonic possibilities of photosculpture through a materially and spatially precarious encounter with memory and place. The installation consists of elongated strips of translucent chiffon printed with photographic images of weathered red bricks–fragments drawn from the hybrid vernacular of Creole⁵ architecture, a form historically entangled with colonial and diasporic histories. Draped from the ceiling and pooling onto the floor, the work occupies the corner of the gallery like a suspended hinge between surface and gravity, image and object.

This transformation destabilizes what Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart describe as 'heritage visuality' (2004)– the institutional aesthetic that monumentalizes the past as coherent and fixed. In contrast, «*Bend don't break*» materializes history as fluid and precarious. The folds, creases, and shadows of the printed fabric evoke the instability of memory– its tendency to blur, fade, and shift under changing light.

The installation invites intimate bodily proximity: the viewer must approach the corner, adjusting posture and movement to perceive its texture and scale. This spatial negotiation enacts Ahmed's notion of 'affective reorientation' (2004), redirecting emotion away from nostalgia's comfort toward a felt awareness of vulnerability and persistence. Through its quiet material tension–its suspension between gravity and air–«*Bend don't break*» articulates Boym's reflective nostalgia as both resistance and renewal. It transforms loss into a tactile dialogue between strength and fragility, structure and softness. In doing so, the work exemplifies photosculpture's power to convert the photographic image into an affective, spatial experience that holds memory not as an image of the past but as a material vibration in the present.

3.3. The ethics of encounter: Photosculpture and the conditions of affective reception

Photosculpture reconfigures the act of viewing by shifting the photograph from a flat, framed surface to an immersive spatial situation. As Claire Bishop argues (2005, 10), installation art compels viewers to «inhabit the work», making bodily participation integral to meaning. Similarly, the

photosculptural encounter situates the spectator within an affective field where perception, movement, and memory intersect.

This participatory dynamic challenges the emotional ease of traditional photographic spectatorship. The familiar pleasure of recognition—central to restorative nostalgia—replaced by hesitation and doubt. Fragmented forms, translucent layers, and unstable assemblages disrupt the circulation of what Ahmed calls ‘affective economies’ (2004, 119): the habitual flows through which feelings like belonging or pride attach to visual icons of heritage. Instead, photosculpture cultivates ‘affective dissonance’—an embodied uncertainty that invites critical reflection.

Such encounters underscore the ethics of attention inherent in reflective nostalgia. To stand among fragile images and precarious materials is to confront the instability of both memory and self. Photosculpture, therefore, does not simply represent nostalgia; it stages its contradictions as spatial, sensory, and relational experience. It foregrounds affect as a shared process—circulating between image, object, and body—through which the past can be felt anew, not as return but as transformation.

4. Conclusion: Reframing nostalgia through photosculpture

By reconfiguring the photographic image as a material and spatial encounter, photosculpture emerges as both an aesthetic and epistemic strategy—one that contests dominant emotional regimes and reimagines the conditions of visual experience. Across the works discussed—Annette Messager’s fragmentary domestic relics, Letha Wilson’s materially ruptured landscapes, and my own pliant reconstructions of Creole architectural fragments—photosculpture transforms nostalgia from a restorative longing for coherence into a reflective practice of critical affect.

Where conventional photographic forms have historically stabilized emotion through optical clarity and narrative unity, photosculpture introduces fragmentation, opacity, and tactile dissonance. These strategies interrupt nostalgia’s capacity to naturalize belonging or heritage, replacing sentimentality with reflection. In this sense, photosculpture enacts what Svetlana Boym calls (2001) ‘reflective nostalgia’: an engagement with the past that acknowledges loss and displacement while resisting closure.

The critical potency of photosculpture lies in its capacity to activate affect materially. Through its use of pliable surfaces, layered imagery, and precarious spatial configurations, photosculpture generates encounters that are at once sensory and conceptual. The viewer’s movement through or around these works transforms memory into a relational process rather than a fixed representation. As Sara Ahmed suggests (2004), such ‘affective reorientations’ can disturb the emotional economies that sustain hegemonic attachments— redirecting feeling toward uncertainty, fragility, and critical awareness.

By staging nostalgia as an unsettled affective field, photosculpture also aligns with decolonial aesthetics, which seek to unlearn the visual hierarchies inherited from colonial and modernist paradigms. The reworking of 'heritage visuality' –the institutional and aesthetic mechanisms through which the past is monumentalized– reveals how emotion functions as an instrument of cultural power. Photosculpture's emphasis on material contingency and sensory encounter challenges this power by making visible its fractures and by inviting alternative modes of remembrance.

Moreover, as a multidisciplinary practice, photosculpture integrates insights from photography theory, sculpture, affect studies, and art history. It demonstrates how artistic research can operate not merely as illustration but as a form of theoretical inquiry– testing ideas through material experimentation. By foregrounding the hybrid status of the image-object, photosculpture contributes to broader debates about post-photographic practices, where the boundaries between seeing, touching, and remembering are continually renegotiated.

Ultimately, photosculpture offers more than a critique of nostalgia; it proposes an alternative mode of feeling. Its hybrid forms enact a shift from representation to encounter, from emotional consumption to affective reflection. In this transformation, nostalgia becomes not a retreat into the past but a means of rethinking the present– a critical space where memory, materiality, and emotion converge to open new possibilities for perception and belonging.

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Notes

1. For understanding 'nostalgia': (Phillips 1985, 71-72).
2. For a discussion on the definition: (Sobieszek 1980, 617).
3. For understanding evolution of definition on 'photosculpture': (Park 2025).
4. Hito Steyerl's work investigates how the digital world and global economic systems 'crash' into or interact with physical reality and human lives.
5. For understanding definition on 'Creole': (Hall 2002, 27–41).

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