

# On memory, trauma, and imagination a new world



Sound artist Maria Chávez on how memory informs her creative practice, how trauma shapes and changes us, and what we need to prioritise as we slowly emerge into a post-virus world

August 12, 2020 -

As told to Ruth Saxelby, 3856 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Mental health](#).

**A lot of the site-specific work you do can't be archived in a traditional way. Is the only way to access it again through your body and mind?**

I think you hit it on the nose with the mind. All my work deals with phenomenology of the mind. I think that's something that people ignore because of the turntable. It's such a prominent object and people are so stuck on it, but they don't understand that the turntablism practice is an additive of an entire oeuvre of work. They're all related in some kind of way, whether my finding field recordings on vinyl to perform and ruin in front of people, therefore creating a new memory that never existed of a time. That's really what I mean by *hyper-memory*. I'll take a moment and I'll either layer it or I'll put it in a situation where it'll either create a memory or it will mimic how the mind remembers.

So you go out and record one day and then you put it in your DAW - I use Reaper - and then you can layer that day on top of itself to make a dense day. You can edit the day and then you are suddenly making your own memory of that day. As you layer on field recordings, what you're actually doing is creating a hyper-memory. Creating tiers of documentation of time and thereby creating an imagined new time.

I was already starting to write [about] hyper-memory installation - that's what I've been calling my installations for the past couple of years now - and I saw it as a new direction in creative field recording installation practice, and felt that it needed to be documented so that it was more coherent for my colleagues to be able assign their own practice with it or not, or disagree or whatever. Which I feel is very academic for a college dropout, but writing is the only way for people to really take me seriously. I wouldn't even have a career if I wasn't writing, which is a totally other conversation.

As the virus started to make its way, I was writing a new proposal for the [American] Academy in Rome. I've been rejected for years so I'm always still trying. With the climate change issues that were happening in Venice - the flooding and the regular weekly high tides - I felt that this was a really important time in history to rush back to Venice and go to every corner of every part and just record everything possible. Because we were never going to be able to hear this city again. It is literally Atlantis, sinking. There's going to be stories in a thousand years about Venice and they'll never know if it was real or not.

I always thought field recording was just an audio snapshot, really. Now, taking the audio snapshot and adapting it to our present moment - who knew our times [would] so drastically [change] in a matter of two weeks. And my god, all of these field recordings that we've all been doing for the past 20-30 years, especially as the hand-held recorders got more and more accessible for the general public - I used to think of it all as, *What are we*

*going to do with all this stuff? It's just trash, everybody's just recording field recordings. I'd always roll my eyes. Now I'm like, You're such an idiot. Thank god everybody was recording our world because it's gone.*

Concerts and live events will never be the same even if they can. You know what I mean? Now that I've changed my mind about all of these ridiculous amounts of recording, I think somehow we all knew. That we were privileged in some way to live in this world. Everybody I knew that was really into field recordings was just frantic - once they got hooked on it, it was like a rabbit hole. Now I just feel like, *My god, we're so lucky.* Now we need to make a library of everything that everyone has done and it'll be audible postcards of our past that we'll never be able to hear again.

**When did you know you were going to be an artist, and how did you arrive at your expansive and generous creative philosophy?**

The generous creative philosophy was chance and luck. If I wasn't surrounded by the right people, I would have become an asshole for sure. And I was on my way to it. But then I had a few situations that happened that really opened my eyes to what it really means to be an artist in a capitalist time. And now entering this virus age, I'm curious, I'm hopeful, but I'm afraid.

Evil minds win out because they play dirty. Especially in times of great survival and crisis. As I was learning about generosity and kindness - and what it really means to be an artist as a human in society, not as a famous artist for glorification - I realised that there are people out there that will do anything to be seen as what they wished they could truly be.

I learned that not only do I have empathy, but I'm more loyal to it than I am to the industry. I feel like that is why my career hasn't really gotten as big as I think it could have had I not realised where I stood morally within this industry - and I'm okay with that. I don't mind if I never get to that place that is expected of artists - galleries and things. In a way, I've always figured out a way to get around it. I'm in permanent collections in art museums but I've never had a gallery represent me my entire career. I'm a college dropout but I'm in history books and I'm on the cover of the textbook on experimental music. I've figured out a way to go around it and not have to deal with it directly because I don't like the environment that comprises these dangerous individuals.

Pauline Oliveros was really my saving grace. She was always teaching empathy, and she was inclusive before inclusivity was a trend. If you look at her sonic meditation books from the '70s, they're all just so generous. Music for everyday people. You don't need to have been schooled in music or in art in order to participate in her work. I think the fact that she didn't participate with her ego the way the boys did, like [John] Cage, that's why she hasn't had a retrospective here in the States - and they all have. I think there's something to that. I am so grateful that I got to know her so early on in my career. My very first turntablism performance was in her mother's piano studio in the house that she grew up in. Because she grew up in Houston and my career started in Houston. And I had no idea until years later. And I didn't even know Pauline was *Pauline* until I moved to New York.

We'd worked together, I'd played all of her pieces, I was studying under her mentee David Dove who was teaching us all improvisation. But I didn't realise they were all with the root of deep listening, I thought this was just how you improvised. And now I just deep listen. And people are like, "How do you deep listen?" I don't even know anymore, it's just part of my day. And then to move to New York and realise what an icon she actually was, I was just kicking myself in my head. In Houston, you don't know as much as a kid in New York would know. The education levels are very different when it comes to this understanding of industry.

As far as just being an actually creative person, that was just something that had followed me throughout my life. I was constantly searching for ways of... I don't know if understanding is the word, but when I first saw a DJ, when I was 16, something in my gut was just, *That's it. That's what you gotta learn, that's what you need to do.* And then I did that as a teenager until I was 20 and then I got kicked out. It was because I was being too experimental. So then I was lost and then I found Dave and Pauline. They were able to provide a safe space for me to be able to evolve this practice that I didn't even know was a practice. I just thought it sounded cool. I

didn't even know that sound art was a real thing. Especially as I've gotten older, [sound art has] become bigger and bigger, and it's become more and more daunting. But I'm curious about the post-virus world and how it's going to shift everybody around.

**As you mentioned over email, you've had a head-start on the experience of self-isolation because of your brain surgery. I was wondering how your relationship to time has changed at all since the surgery, and also your ideas of the future?**

I had no idea that my brain surgery recovery and the virus quarantine had so many similarities to them. In spring 2019, due to a scary situation I found myself in upon returning to NYC from my surgery in Japan, I had to run away to Spain to recover in a friend's empty apartment. And because I had to run away, I broke my foot as I was still on a lot of medication. So from the end of April until the end of June, I was stuck indoors.

The symptoms started in 2014. I didn't get diagnosed until three years later. Everyone kept telling me it was stress and coffee. And then finally when I got diagnosed, [they said] "The only cure is this brain surgery, don't do it. You're going to lose your hearing, it's really rare, it's experimental, don't do it. Just get Botox and forget about it." But it's degenerative, it's just going to get worse. Finally, I did the research on the brain surgery and yes, it was very experimental and difficult - it's in the most difficult part of the brain and brain stem to have any kind of surgery because everything is so close together. You need to have the best of the best, you can't just have any neurosurgeon who can go into a cortex. One wrong [move] and you can't swallow for the rest of your life. Puncture the artery and it's a stroke. Permanent facial paralysis. Permanent hearing loss. You name it, everything was there. So the two year recovery time is more for the nerve, because it's nerve damage ultimately. It's really more of a plumbing issue than a brain cortex issue. It's just the location that makes it so complicated. It was my PICA artery making direct contact with my seventh cranial nerve, so anytime blood would flow it would deform the left side of my face. And it was pretty much making it so that the side of my face was trying to get from here [points to left side of her face] to here [points to back side of her head]. You'll notice in a lot of the interviews on YouTube, I either had them have a shadow or you'll see me going like this [makes contorted face] and that's the blood. You're watching my blood go through my body on my face.

I had the surgery the very end of February [2019]. The spasms went away the next day, returned the next day full force, and then didn't go away till May when I was stuck in Madrid with a broken foot. Then suddenly, I really couldn't move. I already couldn't move because I was just out of it - the medication was for epilepsy and it was like I was drunk for four months. It was terrible. So it wasn't really like I could go outside, or even walk down the stairs. I always needed someone around me. And so once my foot was broken, that was really a moment.

[When I made the decision to have the surgery,] I had to turn down [festivals] from spring 2019 onwards because I didn't know which neurosurgeon I was going to work with or exactly where. But I knew I couldn't do it in America because all the neurosurgeons there kept telling me not to do it or they were \$150,000 just for the surgery alone, not even for the anesthesia or the hospital stay or the medication or the MRIs or the CT scans. So not only was my [2018] tour my way of saying goodbye - I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to come back, I hope I can, I love you guys - it was also to interview my neurosurgeons. [The surgery took place in Japan.]

Suddenly, I'm stuck in Spain and I'm watching all the festival gigs go by and I'm watching all that money and all of the opportunities to meet more people [disappear]. When you watch your life slip through your fingers, but there's literally nothing you can do about it, all you can do is just sink into it. You don't really have any other choice. The sinking into it was so lonely. Nobody else was willing to understand just how much loss I was experiencing. But now that I am watching the same people who dismissed me lose their minds, it really re-triggers [me] and it breaks my heart.

I do feel for them, I do understand that loss is so much more than money. It's personal growth, it's identity. In a capitalist society, we are the real rebels because we are saying, *We don't want to live off the economy that has been provided for us to work for us, we want to live off of our own economy and create it for ourselves.* That's why it's so difficult to be an artist or a musician in these industries because sometimes your work just isn't in the right time for relevance in order for your voice to make its economy.

That is why I try and tell these younger kids: "What is your intention?" Just that you happen to be hip with content in a relevant time and because of that you catch on and people follow you? How long will that last? We don't even know how long content-providing can really last. Fuckjerry's only really been around for about three or four years on Instagram. We really don't know yet how long a content survivor can survive, especially in the virus and post-virus age.

All of these tiers of understanding about what this industry really is and how you enter it, I think is something that I was lucky to experience with the guidance of Pauline. And seeing her career and how patience she was, and now her passing and seeing how her work is being treated and supported. She was a marathon runner.

**Art as a life's work. What is this pandemic making you think about in terms of that?**

What is this new world going to look like? Who is going to survive it? And how do we protect ourselves in this new world? How do we protect the influx of artists of colour and women that have come in and are finally in this new period where we're finally being accepted into contemporary art discourse, where we can really have a place, for the first time - really in the last five years only. They were still questioning it in the early 2000s - lord knows, I had a hell of a time. And so it's just now starting. We are now entering a time when we really need to take seriously how the women and the artists of color who survive the next few decades, how their histories and their archives and estates are going to be maintained and cared for. Because the way [some people are doing it] is complete ownership of objects. In the end, intention is what really matters, and I think right now the virus is showing that to its utmost.

**There's so much conversation right now about the role of the artist. On one hand, artists are expected to create because they supposedly have all this time. But at the same time, artists are some of the most vulnerable people with precarious income situations to begin with, even before the cutting off of so many revenue streams during this crisis. How are you navigating your expectations of yourself as well as other people's expectations?**

Definitely an ebb and flow. There is no right way to manage the expectations that you put on yourself. Especially when you have a productivity level like I did. Some cities, I would have three gigs in one night. It would be teaching a workshop, performing in the museum, and then DJ-ing later that night in a club, and then going to the next city, installing the exhibition, teaching, performing, DJ-ing.

Depending on the individual and their productivity level prior to the virus, I think my best advice when you just don't want to wash dishes or you don't really feel like listening to music is "You are not that identity and you don't have to fulfil that identity alone in your home. You can be yourself."

It's okay to not be productive at all while we're all quarantined. It's okay if you don't put anything out. This is a traumatic thing. The trauma you guys are experiencing on a world level... I hate to draw parallels, but it feels so similar to what I went through last year. That in itself, to lose your life and watch it slip through your hands, is major trauma. The reactions everyone is having is reactions to trauma. We are all dealing with PTSD - some [level of] PTSD depending on just how affected they are, whether they're directly affected by losing loved ones or if they're sick or if they're stranded or don't have any money.

We all have our own relationship to the virus now. Because of that, we all have to recognise that this is a collective trauma, and we all need to treat each other as such. When we deal with each other, we need to remember, "I don't know your triggers right now because we've all just been through this horribly traumatic experience. How can I interact with you better? How can I not dismiss your feelings? How can I avoid toxic positivity? Am I maintaining negative peace because I don't want to be inconvenienced because I'm traumatised and I can't handle hearing more struggle of others?" So I think now, if anything, look up trauma. Do some research about the situation you're in right now. If you don't have a therapist, YouTube is an amazing tool for learning more about trauma and PTSD. That's really helped me with what I was going through. I didn't go for therapy with the brain surgery stuff because I thought I could endure it.

**That's a huge expectation of yourself.**

And likewise, for you guys. It's a huge expectation for all of us - to do this without really coming to terms with what it is we're actually experiencing. A lot of us are dealing with it with a lot of output. And other people are hiding and are afraid and don't know how. These are all trauma responses. And I'm so sad that we've all been affected in these various ways by it.

But I think if we go into the next phase when we can go back outside and interact with each other again, there needs to be at least some kind of general consensus that we are all now trauma survivors. Going into the next phase of our works as a collective and as individuals, we need to have a heightened awareness of that.

There's going to be a lot of culture coming out because everyone's stuck indoors. Archeologists a thousand years from now will be like, "2020 - 2021 was just this outpouring of work. What happened? Oh right, the virus. They had to show their work how they could." I wish I could be alive at that time.

**Maria Chávez recommends:**

I sunk into my brain surgery recovery by watching lectures while staring out the window. Have you heard of the surgeon and writer Leonard Shlain? He passed away in 2009 but his work has aged beautifully. I love his book *Art & Physics* and it is a must-have in any library. [This lecture](#) discusses the relationship between the artist as the first member of culture to see the world in a new way, and shows how the artists' images when superimposed on the physicists' concepts create a compelling fit. It's a great time to listen to his ideas. If only he could be here now to translate this new era.

[Sara Ahmed](#) is an independent feminist scholar who is concerned with how power is experienced and challenged in everyday life and institutional cultures. [This lecture](#) explores how the complaint can be understood as a form of diversity work, as the work you have to do in order to make institutions more open and accommodating to others. Timely with the MeToo movement and other issues dealing with exploitation and power in academia and how it reflects on society. She also writes for [this blog](#).

My good friend Natilee Harren has been researching and writing probably [one of the most comprehensive books about all things FLUXUS](#) and it was finally released in January of this year. I'm so proud of her, it's such an amazing accomplishment about the story of one of my favorite movements in art history. Another must-have in your library.

My latest video piece, *Hair Painting, 2020*, was made for The Kitchen's new Twitch platform and aired this past Tuesday. My sound pieces feature multi-instrumentalist Jordi Wheeler and new solo work from my first iteration of my two-year artist residency with EMPAC this past January. The video is a painting session of me using a brush made from the hair that was shaved off of my head for my brain surgery.

North Brooklyn is the heart of the virus epicenter. Sadly, Williamsburg has the largest numbers of people infected and the hospitals that help these individuals, Elmhurst and Woodhull, have been hit the hardest. [North Brooklyn Angels](#) has decided to donate 3 meals a day for all hospital workers for both hospitals to help keep these heroes saving lives fed with good food from Jimmy's Diner in Williamsburg (best fried chicken). [Please donate](#) if you have the means.

Name

Maria Chávez

Vocation

Sound artist

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