Annotations on the project *Cultivated Baroque Pearls; The World is an Oyster, Opened with a Knife* by Cristóbal Gracia, made before and during its production.

The starting point of this project, though not its conclusion, is the use of plaster casts of classical sculptures as tools used in the construction of the notion of art in its modern understanding, largely invented in the 19th century. My interest in molds and plaster reproductions began in 2019 when I found a workshop in Italy that produced these objects. Among the hundreds of molds and casts, I came across a set of shelves housing a rather peculiar group of figures: David, the Venus de Milo, the Virgin Mary, a Buddha, and a Mussolini, among others. These characters had little relation to each other; however, what united them was their aesthetic and materiality: the pure white plaster.

In 2020, I began my Master's degree at Yale School of Art, the same university where, in the 1950s, Josef Albers destroyed most of the school's collection of plaster reproductions of classical sculptures to "free students from the weight of history and tradition," while architect Paul Rudolph salvaged the remaining fragments and installed them in his brutalist concrete building, inaugurated as the Yale Art and Architecture Building. This anecdote caught my attention because it represents a highly contemporary issue: a dispute over historical narratives and how to relate to history and tradition. While Albers exemplifies the avant-garde, Rudolph embodies American modernity's desire to be part of the canon of Western civilization—an entire debate mediated through these plaster casts. At this point, I began researching the tradition of plaster reproductions in greater depth, and from this anecdote, the project Dreams of a Baroque Totality was born. Another major reference for the current project is the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico, which houses the oldest collection of plaster reproductions of classical sculptures in the Americas.

The use of molds and plaster reproductions dates back to ancient Rome. However, it was not until modernity that they helped construct, disseminate, and impose an ideal of a dominant Western culture expressed through a singular aesthetic: the classical canon. This was achieved with the support of various ideological institutions such as universities and museums. Archaeology also had a significant impact on the production of molds and plaster casts, aiming to reconstruct the fragmented body of antiquity from scattered remains in an attempt to recover an essence or a "lost original" of Western culture. Meanwhile, museums had the ability to recreate a universal, linear, and progressive historicity—chronologically perfect—from ruined fragments to a hyper-real and autonomous totality, reinvented in service of imperial nationalisms and nation-states. Leading Western museums had plaster workshops that produced authorized reproductions. More than mere copies, plaster casts were considered hyper-real versions, as they were produced from museum to museum without an intermediary decontextualization by antiquity. One of plaster's key attributes was its ability to take on countless patinas that mimicked different materials. However, its greatest virtue was the plaster itself—white and gleaming—which allowed for a new and modern interpretation of universal history.

The 20th century brought the decline of plaster reproductions. The causes were varied: the World Wars, artistic avant-gardes, the economic rise of the United States, revolutions in the Global South, and paradoxically, the very boom of the plaster reproduction industry; new archaeological discoveries were followed by an overproduction of plaster casts, and museums were eager to acquire them. However, these casts became more ambitious but also

dreds of pieces, making proper assembly impossible. This overproduction shattered the illusion of a linear chronology—museums had neither the space nor the means to house and display the casts in a way that created a cohesive historical narrative. A great example of this is the 1987 New York Times article "Plaster Casts of Statues: From Storage into Vogue". The article describes the fate of the once-revered collection at the MET, a museum that initially aimed to house the world's largest collection of plaster casts. However, by the 1940s, the collection had been abandoned in storage. The article recounts how the casts were left in "crammed and disordered rows, with cracked faces blackened by decades of accumulated dirt and dust." This fate was shared by many plaster cast collections across Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

My project builds on the exaggeration of this moment of failure. I want to imagine and exhibit the point at which these aesthetic-ideological tools were hidden from view because they were no longer needed—just like any other tool that is put away once construction is complete. The decline of plaster molds had already established an ideological and institutional framework that continues to operate today. The overcrowded rows of casts disrupt the historical linearity created by plaster reproductions, offering the possibility of generating new narratives without erasing past ones but rather contradicting them—since every rupture is also a continuation. The cracks create a space within the dominant cultural canon, allowing us to transform it from within. The dust that accumulates consists of microparticles of solid matter from a discarded history—yet one that is in constant production and movement. As it settles on the plaster casts, it gradually alters their form and meaning, much like an oyster that defends itself against a parasite burrowing into its shell, slowly coating it with nacre until it forms a pearl.

Speaking more concretely about the works to be created, I envision a series of sculptures—or as I call them, baroque pearls—featuring shells made of brass, a material typically used in jewelry, museum displays, and other so-called "minor arts." Fragments of these plaster casts will be covered in layer upon layer of exaggerated dust; its particles will not be microscopic but macroscopic, and the size of these pearls will not be that of a natural one but rather human-scale. The objects to be crushed and turned into macro-dust for the sculptures will be sourced primarily from flea markets and second-hand street markets. By this, I do not mean antique shops or stores selling vintage or kitsch objects, but rather markets where items recently salvaged from the trash are sold—objects whose immediate fate, if unsold that day, is to become garbage again. My interest in these places and objects stems from the idea of dust as discarded material given a second chance—not only through an artistic logic but within a social contract. That is, its use-value operates not only within the artistic field but also in the everyday life of a society. This moment of tension between material and natural processes is what gives the project its title, *Cultivated Baroque Pearls*.

Cultivated pearls are those created through human intervention—the word cultivated refers to this intervention, in contrast to natural pearls, in which neither human hands nor culture play a role in their formation. This distinction seems to suggest that the world of nature is one that has not been created .it is the dust that completes the work.

The idea that nature is uncreated by humans, whereas culture is the world shaped by human hands, forms the core of this project. Rather than resolving this tension, I am interested in finding moments in my work that function as sutures—elements that unite while simultaneously revealing separation. The base or pedestal of the sculptures mentioned earlier is inspired by the cultivation towers used in pearl farms, while the exhibition's museography will

be structured like a jewelry box with lighting: a Caravaggesque chiaroscuro with theatrical, directed lights. For the exhibition invitation, a fully staged image will be created—a black jewelry box overflowing with oysters and shells, illuminated in an exaggerated manner.

The project will also include wall-mounted works, where the baroque pearls will take on a two-dimensional form. Fragments of plaster casts from the collection of the Academy of San Carlos will be screen-printed onto linen canvases. Between these fragments, empty spaces will be left, functioning as fractures, which will be filled with the previously mentioned macroscopic dust. However, in this case, the dust will be two-dimensional and will come from shredded printed materials—books, magazines, and other publications. The shredded paper will gradually accumulate over the screen prints, nearly obscuring them, creating forms reminiscent of baroque pearls.

My interest in equating dust—understood as material culture in constant production, movement, and disposal—with the nacre of a pearl oyster has led me to explore a decorative artisanal tradition that arrived in Mexico from Asia during the colonial period: enconchado. This genre of New Spanish Baroque painting is characterized by the incorporation of nacre inlays within compositions, as well as wooden panels adorned with mother-of-pearl (nacre) or abalone shell inlays. One of the few remaining workshops in Mexico specializing in this technique is located in Nith, a town near Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo. These pieces will be created in collaboration with Taller Orígenes, a recently formed workshop in the area, made up of several families dedicated to abalone shell inlay.

Don Pedro, one of the workshop's oldest members, has 60 years of experience in this technique and has taught several of the current artisans. The other members include Francisca (Don Pedro's daughter), her husband Gerardo, Alberto (with whom I have had the most communication), Héctor, Margarito, Domitilo, and Leonardo. These works will function as photographic stills or frozen moments depicting dust as it floats and settles on the plaster sculptures—or as microscopic views of dust particles, where fragments of the crushed objects composing the sculptures, both recognizable and unrecognizable, will be reproduced in nacre and inlaid onto wooden panels with a black resin background (the black pigment is obtained by carbonizing and pulverizing a sheep's leg bone).

The plaster sculptures will be translated into irregular plaster mosaics with drawings of piled-up sculpture fragments. However, the lines of these drawings will be carved with a router, functioning as cracks within the plaster. These lines or fractures will merge, consume, and blend into the composition itself. Each panel will measure approximately 85 x 130 cm.

Another key aspect of my interest in this process of dust accumulation and the soiling of plaster casts relates to a critical issue in the reading of artworks. Typically, art is interpreted through a historicist lens, focused on the context of its production, or simply judged from the present moment. I do not think this is incorrect, but rather insufficient. This insufficiency stems from the fact that the intermediate time—the period between the work's production and today—is often ignored. I identify this intermediate time here as the accumulation of dust. And rather than the spectator completing the work, as Duchamp claimed that the work continues to be produced beyond the artist's studio—not only by the spectator, of course, but also by the artwork's own history, its moments and spaces of exhibition, and even its periods of abandonment and neglect. Using the same overproduction that

shattered the plaster reproduction industry in the early 20th century, I will create a polyptych of unique-excessive prints. By this, I mean deliberately making prints badly, on purpose. For these prints, the plates will be created by fragmenting images, and instead of generating a series of identical prints, there will be an overproduction of labor and images. Irregularly shaped printing plates will be passed through the press over and over again, producing baroque and unrepeatable compositions, where images interact in an unpredictable manner, filling space profusely—until the fragment begins to dissolve into an overwhelming, chaotic whole.

The first impressions will be made without inking the plates, functioning more as embossings. Rather than producing an image, they will create a kind of valley on the sheet of paper, shaped by the plate—an empty container. As the plates become inked, they will start to fill and overflow, reaching a point of total saturation—pushing the limits until they verge on becoming empty again. The polyptych will consist of 18 pieces, each measuring 95 x 70 cm. The use of a polyptych allows for the work to be continuously reconfigured, as there is no fixed order in which it must be installed. The piece will also include the copper plates used in the printing process, offering the possibility of continued production (under the right conditions).

Upon receiving an invitation to collaborate with Mike's workshop—a studio specializing in historical photographic techniques such as photogravure, cyanotype, and gelatin silver printing—I decided to merge the previously mentioned wall-mounted works. A composition of plaster cast fragments, similar to the one used in the screen-printed pieces, will be printed using heliogravure, a 19th-century photographic technique that employs a copper plate.

On the same copper plate, drypoint drawings of the fragmented objects used in the sculptures (which were also referenced in the design process for the nacre and abalone shell pieces) will be etched and engraved. These drawings will be added in three stages, progressively intensifying the saturation of the original heliogravure image. Each of these stages will be printed separately to create a polyptych of four impressions. The copper plate itself will also be exhibited as a piece—acting as the condensed labor of the entire edition, while the paper prints represent its expansion. I see this work as a kind of graphic close-up of the sculptures, or as a series of cross-sections or X-rays of them.

Each work and body of work represents different moments of the same project, utilizing the possibilities and limitations of each discipline while reinforcing one another.

My interest in pearls is not aesthetic but rather process-based—a starting point for investigating the baroque, historical narratives, parasitic relationships, and analyzing how certain aesthetic and ideological canons are imposed upon foreign cultures, which, as an act of resistance and survival, transform them from within—creating a third identity. The term baroque originates from the Portuguese barrôco, meaning an irregular pearl. My approach to the baroque extends beyond its historical artistic period, following a contemporary Latin American tradition led by the Marxist thinker Bolívar Echeverría and the poet Severo Sarduy, who understand the baroque as a suspended stage of transition and civilizational crisis—an ethos of subversion that perceives modernity as a multiplicity.

of simultaneous narratives in conflict. A pearl is formed when a parasite pierces the shell of an oyster and is coated with mother-of-pearl, also known as nacre. The philosopher Michel Serres argues that parasitism creates unequal and complex systems of exchange that function as the production of change within the relationship itself, demonstrating that every parasite is, in turn, also a host.

The prefix para- in parasite means "beside" or "next to." It does not exist on or within something but rather on its relationship. Communication depends on parasites, and while the parasite mediates communication, it also transforms it. This disruption of a message is neither entirely negative, positive, nor neutral. Its productive value can only be determined retrospectively and on a case-by-case basis. It even allows us to embrace failure as a productive mode of creation.

A system is a set of messages; to hear only the message itself, one would have to be identical to the sender. If everything functioned in perfect balance—without losses or gains—there would be no need for communication. It would be a system completely closed off from the rest of the world. Parasites are the foundation of intersubjectivity, of being together.

A common adjective used to describe the baroque is excess. Unlike predators, parasites do not participate in a simple food chain. The parasite depends on excess, redirecting the host's surplus energy and subtly shifting the system's condition in small increments. By inserting the notion of the parasite into the baroque, we can address contemporary concerns about excess—understood as the production of profit and wealth but also as waste—and how these are distributed, creating an artificial scarcity (vacuum, horror vacui).