

- From Offramp 16: Trauma  
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## Inventions of the Real: Tarrah Krajnak's "Lima, Peru, circa 1979" Works



(Sites of Violence) Walking Woman with Bag,  
September 1979, Lima, Peru, (from El Jardín de  
Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018 Photography  
credits Tarrah Krajnak

In her introduction to the landmark edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), literary theorist Cathy Caruth observes two competing tendencies: as renewed interest in trauma has driven

some to clinically define it in terms of its symptoms (in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially acknowledged it under the name “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”), the field of trauma studies has increasingly welcomed accounts from a range of disciplines. Psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature (one could include here other forms of art), she claims, seem called upon “to explain, to cure, or to show why it is that we can no longer simply explain or simply cure.”<sup>1</sup> Trauma has become “all-inclusive,” she continues, “precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding,” with each discipline compelled to engage the others “through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.”<sup>2</sup>



(Sites of Violence) Self Portrait (Turned) as Walking Woman with Bag, September 1979, Lima, Peru, (from El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak

Given its ability to reveal the limits of understanding, trauma inevitably raises questions regarding representation and history. In psychoanalysis and psychiatry, trauma is discussed on an individual level, as a person’s involuntary response to an overwhelming event or events in the form of repeated dreams, thoughts, or behaviors. Trauma is not defined by the encounter itself—since it cannot be assimilated or fully experienced at the time of its occurrence—but rather by the belated effects experienced by the survivor, in its “repeated possession of the one who experiences it,” as Caruth has aptly put it.<sup>3</sup> But can trauma also be understood on a collective level? If so, how can we represent or speak about social histories of collective trauma and intergenerational trauma without abstracting or generalizing an individual’s singular experience of it?



Hotel Bolivar (from Sismos79/Marble Studies), 2014  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Lima Infestada (from Sismos79/Marble Studies),  
2014 Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak

These are some of the central questions, I propose, that animate a recent body of works by the artist Tarrah Krajnak. For the past six years, Krajnak has been producing series of photographic works that circle around the particular circumstances of her birth. She was born in Peru and left at an orphanage as an infant in Lima in 1979. That same year, she was adopted by parents from the U.S., where she was raised in the Midwest. She now lives in Los Angeles. As Krajnak grew older, she was told different stories about her origins (none of which she has been able to verify). In one story, told by the nuns who ran the orphanage, her birth mother was a very young woman from a village in the north who had moved to the city to work as a maid. She was raped, which is how Krajnak was conceived. This story, Krajnak later found out, is essentially the same as that of Sarita Colonia, a Peruvian folk saint whose story was popularized in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a tumultuous period of social and political unrest. Furthermore, the year 1979 marked a transitional moment in the country's history, from the military dictatorship of the 1970s to widespread bloodshed and violence with the beginning of the Communist Party's (also known as *Sendero Luminoso*, or the "Shining Path") guerrilla war in 1980.





Lineup (from *Sismos79/Marble Studies*), 2014

Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Dead Ringer (from *Sismos79/Marble Studies*), 2014

Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak

From 2013 until now, Krajnak has produced three discrete series that I am collectively calling, for the purposes of this essay, her “Lima, Peru, circa 1979” works (a phrase taken from one of the artist’s project statements). Her first series in this larger body of related works is titled *Sismos79* (2013–17), made during multiple residencies in Lima. *Sismos79*—*sismo* is the Spanish word for “earthquake,” referring the seismic, or one could say traumatic, changes happening in Lima and elsewhere in Peru—consists of photographs, recordings, and videos, made through a combination of fieldwork, re-photography, and intensive collection of old photographs, particularly those of young women, and print magazines from 1979 purchased in flea markets downtown. Through the juxtaposition and photographing of heterogeneous found materials, as in *Hotel Bolivar* and *Lineup* (both 2014), and staging portraits of women born in the same city and year as the artist, as in her *Time Twin* series (2014–), *Sismos79* imaginatively weaves together a sense of the historical and social fabric into which she was born.



Self Portrait (Turned) as Crowd, 1979 Lima,  
Peru/2019 Los Angeles, CA (from 1979: Contact  
Negatives), 2019 Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak





Self Portrait with 3 Nude Women, 1979 Lima  
Peru/2019 Los Angeles, CA (from 1979: Contact  
Negatives), 2019 Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak

In her most recent series, *1979: Contact Negatives* (2019), Krajnak literally situates her body within visual representations of this historical fabric. For this work, Krajnak produced 18 large-format photographs during the course of a solo exhibition at as-is.la gallery in Los Angeles. The gallery's exhibition room functioned as a temporary photo studio and darkroom, as Krajnak created multiple long exposure photographs of images projected onto her body. Floor-to-ceiling length sheets of paper and rectangular Minimalist blocks arranged along the gallery's walls formed her backdrop. The images, re-photographed from the magazines she had purchased in Lima, depict women walking in the city, streetscapes, beauty pageants, and large-scale protests taking place around Lima in 1979. These scenes envelop the artist's body only to become fragmented and distorted through the fissures and unevenness of the various planar surfaces. The performative photographic process and resulting works of *1979: Contact Negatives* most explicitly recall certain key characteristics of trauma, including the collapsing of past into present, the registration of an event but lack of its integration into narrative memory, and perhaps most palpably, a pervasive sense of dissociation, which psychiatrist and PTSD specialist Bessel van der Kolk has called "the essence of trauma."<sup>4</sup>



Self Portrait as Protest (Sitting), 1979 Lima,  
Peru/2019 Los Angeles, CA (from 1979: Contact  
Negatives), 2019 Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Self Portrait as Miss Universe Contestant (Sitting),  
1979 Lima, Peru/2019 Los Angeles, CA (from 1979:  
Contact Negatives), 2019 Photography credits Tarrah  
Krajnak





Self Portrait as Building with Child Prostitute, 1979  
 Lima, Peru/2019 Los Angeles, CA (from 1979:  
 Contact Negatives), 2019 Photography credits Tarrah  
 Krajnak

These photographic works by Krajnak should not be interpreted as a working through of the artist's personal experience of trauma per se. Rather, they should be understood as speaking to a larger social history—of which she is inadvertently a part—that is itself traumatic. The conceptual problem at stake in these works is one of representation: how can one convey the truth of a traumatic social history as well as the truth of its fundamental incomprehensibility? This question is addressed most poignantly in Krajnak's *El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan* [The Garden of Forking Paths] (2018), titled after the Jorge Luis Borges short story of the same name. In this series, we see photographs titled *Holding Hands* of the artist's hand holding old passport-sized photos of smiling young women, photographs of the artist's body re-enacting a photo of a woman walking down the street in Lima in 1979, photographs of "time twins" disorientingly projected onto the artist's own face, a photograph of the first page of an essay titled "Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of Rape?," among others. About this series, Krajnak has written: "In this book, I set out not to recover some stable authentic identity hidden by the circumstances of my birth and adoption, but rather to build a psychic history, to imagine lineages, to invent mothers, and to resurrect ancestors in an effort to understand my place within the larger political, social, and historical narratives of my birth place—Lima, Peru, circa 1979."<sup>5</sup>



Holding Hands (from El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018 Photography credits



Rosa Triptych1

Time Twin (Triptych), Self-Portrait as Rosa, Lima, Peru  
1979 / Lima, Peru 2014 / Claremont, CA (from El  
Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Rosa Triptych2

Time Twin (Triptych), Self-Portrait as Rosa, Lima, Peru  
1979 / Lima, Peru 2014 / Claremont, CA (from El  
Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



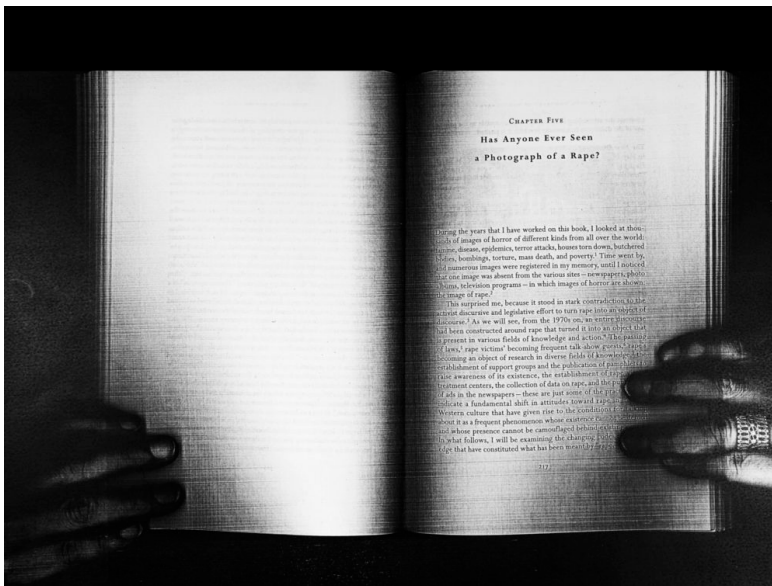


### Rosa Triptych3

Time Twin (Triptych), Self-Portrait as Rosa, Lima, Peru  
1979 / Lima, Peru 2014 / Claremont, CA (from El  
Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Holding Hands (from El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018 Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of Rape? (from  
El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak



An Offering to Sarita Colonia, 1979, Lima, Peru (from  
El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan) 2018  
Photography credits Tarrah Krajnak

Claude Lanzmann provocatively called *Shoah* (1985), his critically acclaimed ten-hour-long film composed of Holocaust testimonies, “a fiction of the real.”<sup>6</sup> He insisted that his film is not a documentary, that it is not primarily historical, and not meant to explain why and how the Holocaust came about, infamously declaring that “There is indeed an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Krajnak’s works, I would argue, do not attempt a project of “understanding” per se, but one of retrieval, re-enactment, and empathetic connection, a “making visible” of objects and bodies previously submerged from view and once again re-presented in the company of self-fashioned kin.<sup>8</sup> Navigating the disruptions and gaps of the historical circumstances into which she was born, Krajnak, in her “Lima, Peru, circa 1979” works, inventively presents new constellations of being and belonging, to generate, as in Borges’s tale, a movement of time and psychic space that “forks perpetually toward innumerable futures.”<sup>9</sup>

Kavior Moon is an art historian and critic who teaches at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), where she is a Liberal Arts Faculty member. She received a B.A. in Visual Arts from Columbia University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she wrote her dissertation on the later works of Michael Asher and the expanded field of contemporary art institutions. Her scholarly work focuses on modern and contemporary art history, with a particular emphasis on institutional critique and experimental, post-studio art practices after 1960. In addition to SCI-Arc, Moon has taught at UCLA and ArtCenter College of Design. Her essays and reviews have appeared in such publications as *Artforum*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*. She is a founding board member of Equitable Vitines, a non-profit public art organization based in Los Angeles.





Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4. ↩

Ibid. ↩

Ibid. ↩

Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 66. ↩

Tarrah Krajnak, statement for Senderos Que Se Bifurcan, [tarrahkrajnak.com/senderos/1](http://tarrahkrajnak.com/senderos/1) (accessed Aug 6, 2019) ↩

Lanzmann is quoted in Dominick LaCapra's "Lanzmann's 'Shoah': 'Here There Is No Why,'" *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 232. For arguably the most influential account of Lanzmann's Shoah, see Shoshana Felman's "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 103-150. ↩

Ibid., 236. ↩

I take the term "making visible" from Krajnak's statement for 1979: *Contact Negatives*. About this photo series, she writes: "The resulting series of self-portraits emerge from intersections between the city's fraught history and my own, making visible the ways that violent or traumatic histories can be held in bodies and excluded from archives." See Tarrah Krajnak, *Statement for 1979: Contact Negatives*, [tarrahkrajnak.com/1979-contact-negatives/1](http://tarrahkrajnak.com/1979-contact-negatives/1) (accessed Aug 6, 2019). ↩

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), 28. ↩