

AALST, BELGIUM

Dora García

NETWERK AALST

As a justification for incrementalism, President Barack Obama leaned on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sentiment that while the moral arc of the universe is long, it bends toward justice; the quotation was even stitched into an Oval Office carpet. Said another way, our leaders have made us a promise: If we place our confidence in them, and in the system of liberal democracy, progress is inevitable. But what should those who have waited so long do, and what is the effect when such pledges remain unfulfilled? Such is the crux of Dora García's *If I Could Wish for Something*, 2021, the film that lent its title to her most recent



Dora García, *If I Could Wish for Something*, 2021, 4K video, color, sound, 67 minutes.

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exhibition. The show also featured another film by García, *Love with Obstacles*, 2020, which reflects on Russian feminist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai and through her legacy traces the still ongoing fight for the full emancipation of women.

If I Could Wish for Something intercuts two activities: the recording of “*Si pudiera desear algo*,” a song by Mexican trans woman musician La Bruja de Texcoco that proposes sadness as a form of empowerment, and demonstrations marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25, 2020, in Mexico City. On first blush, the two sets of footage couldn’t be more different: The musical narrative is filmed mostly within the studio as musicians come together, listen to each other, and move toward a finished version; the rest of the film, shot on phone cameras, centers on the members of Okupa Cuba Casa Refugio (Cuba Occupation Shelter House) and their use of black-bloc tactics against the sitting “leftist” Mexican president’s lax policies toward femicide, sexual violence, and other forms of the systemic marginalization of women. In one key moment, the camera fixes on the fury of an activist animated with what can only be called divine rage. In the ensuing shots, we see acts of arson and vandalism, yet something much more is embedded within.

García has reprinted various protest slogans and quotes from Kollontai on placards that were placed throughout the exhibition next to a set of similarly sized posters, each featuring an image of a personification of feminine power, such as the Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue and the Virgen de Guadalupe. García’s elevation of modern figures to these ranks—Kollontai and the contemporary protestors in the film—suggests a new pantheon of heroines and links liberation struggles ranging from decolonization to socialism to feminism. Jonathan Shay, a doctor, clinical psychiatrist, and specialist working with war survivors, has referred to a different female figure (not included by García, although her name in Spanish, Justicia, is shouted by protesters throughout the film): the Greek goddess Themis, the personification of justice. In his decades-long practice, Shay critiques the “disorder” diagnosis inherent to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and redefines trauma not as an illness but as an actual wound, “a moral injury” against a person’s sense of “what is right,” the phrase a rough translation of the goddess’s Greek name. Such assaults involve “a betrayal of what is right, by someone who holds legitimate authority.” Through intertextual analysis of the *Iliad* and his clinical work with Vietnam War veterans, the doctor suggests Achilles’s wrath is an adaptive behavior developed to survive the kind of wound that slices through a person’s sense of identity by violating their ethics, and, by extension, their relation to society. Several protesters in García’s *If I Could Wish for Something* implicate the Mexican government and its dereliction of duty, while one of them screams directly at the police, “It was you who hurt me.”

While the two poles of García’s powerful film appear disparate at first, they can be read as expressions of how collectively giving voice to injurious experience advances necessary soul repair and fosters profound cohesion. The film thereby suggests an answer to an urgent wish: To build a better society we must first rebuild trust in our daily social relations so that they reflect and model the larger society we desire. Neither rebels nor *brujas* (witches) wait for the universe to bend.

—Adam Kleinman