



## CANTOS

*an exploration of oneself and performance through the making of artist books*

By *María Carolina Ceballos*

### ABOUT MARÍA CAROLINA CEBALLOS

*María Carolina Ceballos is a Colombian book artist with interdisciplinary focus. She has exhibited her work in various cities in Colombia, the United States and Japan. She holds a BFA in Visual Arts from the Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, and a Minor in Photography from the same university. She recently graduated from the MFA in Book Arts at The University of Iowa, where she also worked as a book conservation technician and digital book design instructor. In her recent artistic practice, she has been exploring traditional book related crafts and applying them to a body of work with visual arts disciplines, creative writing, and music notation and performance.*

*I am making cantos [songs] for the book,  
and for the rain  
and for my own body  
and for others'*

*I canto [sing] them*

*How many books can make my canto [voice] wake?*

The first song I wrote was about love. Young, inexperienced, innocent love. After that, the songs I have written are about myself, my home, my identity.

Songs are books.

The music sheets I carried for three hours every week to sing them in a choir, the notes on them. Me taping the sheets of paper as an accordion or folding them in half. I was making books with music. I was singing those books.

Books have been used as tools for singing for a long time. Neumes, for example, were used by medieval monks to give certain intonation to prayers recited in unison. Books have recorded music and other performative arts in a silent space, a space different from a CD or a vinyl record, a space where our bodies create the sounds or movements.

Books need a human body to perform them, but they have their own body, too. A spine, a weight, layers of skin and bones protecting the *tripa*,<sup>1</sup> cords like nerves, paper that speaks by itself, and, finally, memories in the shape of symbols.

These symbols have become standardized, like languages or manners, as music writing evolved with the evolution of music itself. But what happens when these standardizations are questioned? My work asks you to rethink the book's body as an extension of our own.

#### TRANSLATING SOUND INTO DRAWING AND POETRY: SILENT WORKS

*Canto de un copetón* (2015), was one my first artist books and one of what I call “silent works” (fig. 1). These are works that come from concepts of processing sound information, but as final pieces, are appreciated silently and do not need to be performed. They are scores conceived not as a set of instructions, but more as a visual language related to a music score and to the experience of sound in landscape.

This book is based on a sonogram of the song of a *copetón*<sup>2</sup>, which is a bird found in Bogotá, and a single-sentence poem I wrote inspired by this bird and the experiences I've had with it since my childhood.

The book reconstructs the poem page by page and plays with the image of the singing sound as it illustrates the different parts of the poem.

This piece started with an interest in the possibilities of sound captured in the form of a book.

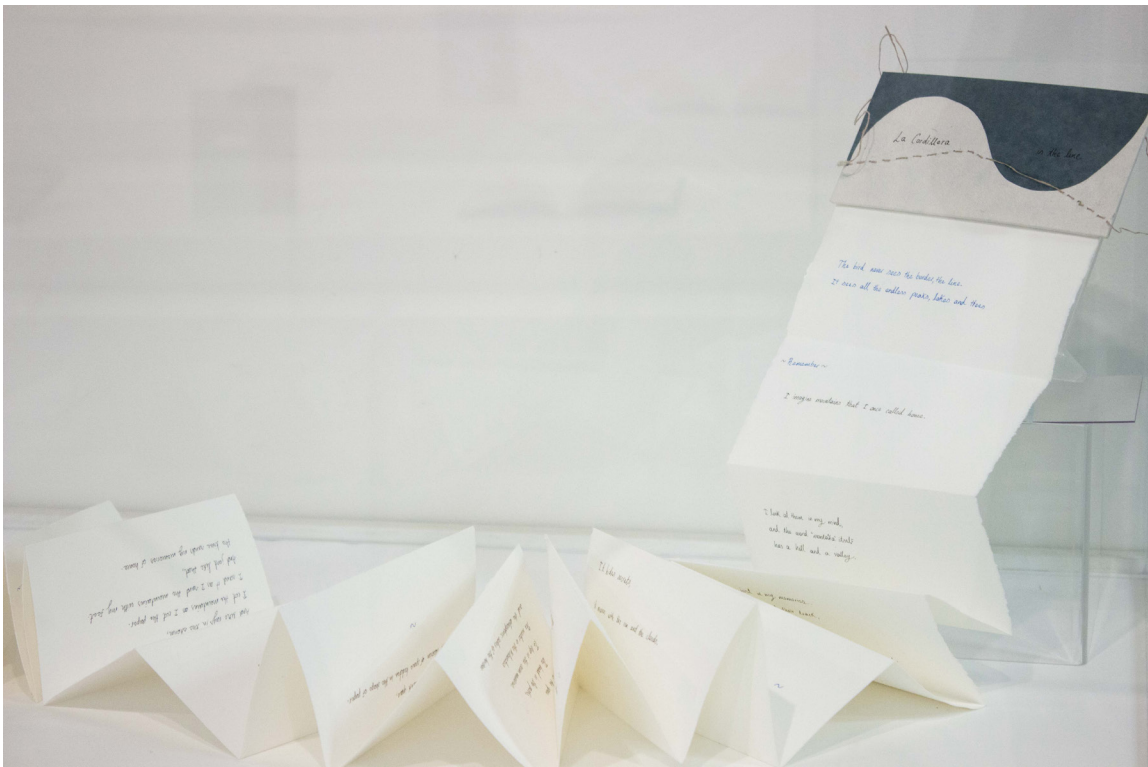
Fig. 1: Ceballos, *Canto de un copetón* (2015). Drawing and digital printing, Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Spread showing the decomposition and game of visual interpretation of the original sonogram of the singing of the copetón.



## READING OUT LOUD

In 2019, I created some pieces around the geological concept and cultural ideas of mountains. These geological accidents are very important to me, since my city's landscape, weather, and even self-contained culture are because of mountains. This deep connection I have to these geological forms inspired shapes, songs, and a lot of writing. The longest of these writings is part of a triptych called *La Cordillera* (fig. 2). *La Cordillera* is a long accordion book filled with handwritten text that I call *The Line*. The *cordillera*<sup>3</sup> is the line not just because of how we see the mountain on the horizon, but also because it is a time line full of stories, diverse cultures, ecosystems, and landscapes.

Fig. 2: Ceballos, *La Cordillera* triptych part three: *The Line* (2019). Machine-made paper and India ink. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. *The Line*, the third piece from the triptych *La Cordillera*, containing writing about the other two pieces and *De las montañas*.



This book cannot be fully understood exhibited inside a case or as a still object. When this book is performed in public, it truly comes alive. The long accordion moves from the gallery cases to my hands as I read it like the cordillera itself. Experiencing my voice speaking Spanglish, the handwritten elements, and the shape of the accordion are all integral parts of this work.

Galia Ospina, in her book *El Libro álbum*, refers to the three dimensions necessary to make a book come to life: the maker/writer, the book object, and the reader<sup>4</sup>. Ospina focuses her research on illustrated books, but this idea of dimensions, I think, should be applied to many other book genera like artist books and scores. Many poems, artist books, and of course, scores, need to be read out loud, not just to be fully appreciated, but to exist.

### INSPIRED BY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

In my work with handmade paper, I began not only embracing the sound qualities of the paper itself, but enhancing them. My search for the sounds of paper began, and I found how new instruments that take advantage of the qualities of handmade paper can be made. Alison Knowles does something similar in her performance, *Newspaper Music*, by creating paper objects that have a performative presence and sound.

In 2019, for a collaborative show and performance with papermaker and book artist Jocmarys Viruet Feliciano, I crafted two instruments completely out of handmade paper to accompany my singing and her dancing as she moved with a skirt made with the Korean joomchi technique (fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

These instruments were imitating a *maracón*, a big maraca used in Afro-Caribbean communities in some areas of Colombia and Latin America; and a small kind of *tambor*, or drum. These two instruments were specially made for the performance of a *bullerengue* and other Caribbean rhythms. For us it was important to devise these objects ourselves as we identify as crafters, performers, papermakers, and Latin-Americans.

Fig. 3: Ceballos, Bullerengue (2019). Handmade flax and cotton paper. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. The three instruments for a bullerengue displayed with the broadside of one of the songs performed by Jocmarys Viruet Feliciano and me.



## CONCERT BOOKS: CREATING MY OWN NEUMES, INSTRUMENTS, AND NOTATION

I wanted to make a book edition that would be understood and performed, not just by me, but hopefully by others in the near or distant future. I call this new work a concert book: a book that would act like an artist book, a musical score, and an instrument.

In the spring of 2019, I started research on the printing techniques and history of musical scores. For my books, *Scores by a Wanderer* and *Lines*, I wanted to create my own notation system.

I frequently used the neumes notation. The neumes notation was common between the ninth and thirteenth centuries in Europe in religious works. It was placed above the text and in a different color to give directions for the intonation and melody for recitation. These symbols were a guide for communal reading/singing, but they are not entirely specific. They lack key, rhythm, and tonality.

*Lines* (fig. 4) and *Scores by a Wanderer* (fig. 5) are both performed in a melodic and theatrical way, located somewhere on the spectrum between traditional music and poetry recitation.

My invented lines and symbols (which come with a key for understanding) indicate volume, kind of sound, and frequency, but leave much to interpretation.

I also returned to working with paper as a musical instrument for *Scores by a Wanderer* by adding handmade paper inclusions that can be played.

Having as reference the progress in notation and sound-making instruments I had from this previous work, my next work, *Fragmentos de lluvia* (2020–21), is an ode to my home and its rainy weather, and how everything in the country depends on rain (figs. 6–10). It is also an ode to the papermaking practice, a discipline that depends on water, time, and rhythm for its creation.

The poem for this book began as a compilation of memories of rain and other water phenomena from Colombia, in contrast to my experiences of water while living in Iowa. This poem became a music piece very quickly, as water and memories flow like music. My memories of rain and experiences

Fig. 4: Ceballos, detail of *Lines* (2019). Letterpress and linocut printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Detail showing the recitation directions above the poem.

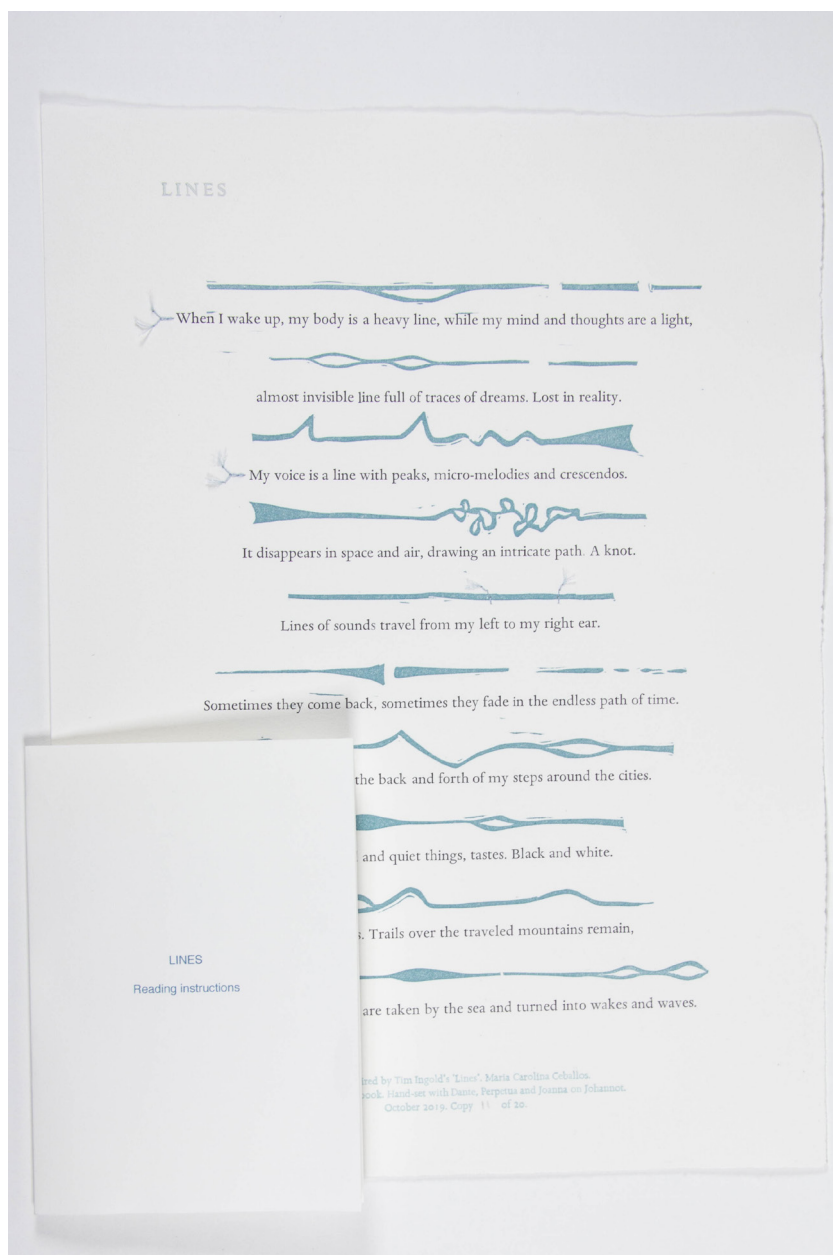
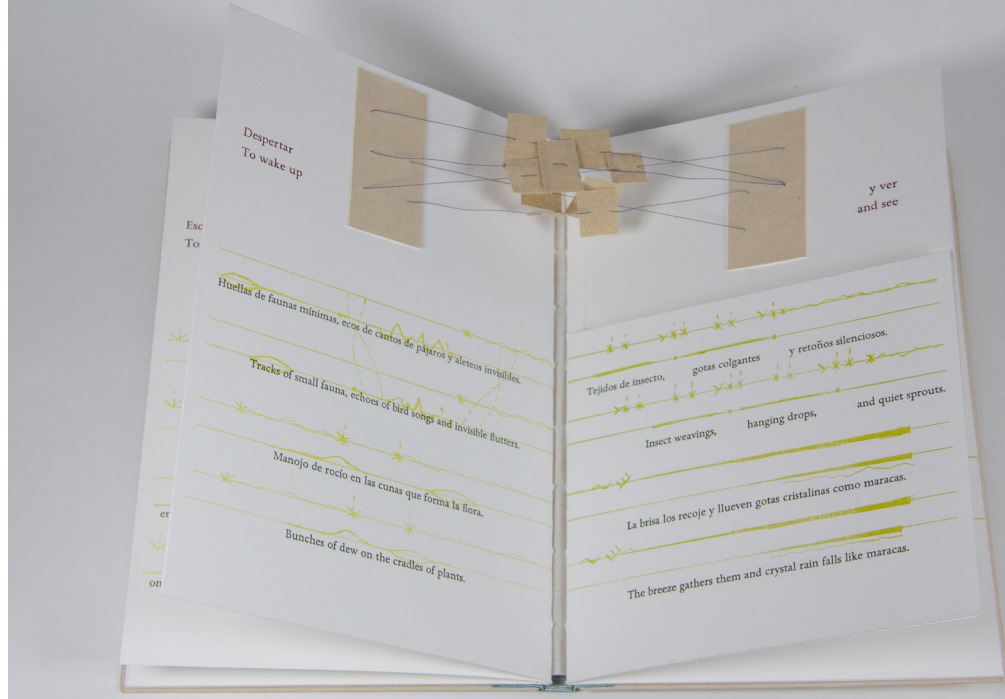


Figure 5: Ceballos, Scores by a Wanderer (2019). Letterpress printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Spread showing the notation for voices, paper instruments, and hand gestures, as well as one of the two instruments existing inside the book.



of water with papermaking both have sound as their principal component. It is a sung recitation that allows both the choir performers and soloist to improvise and move like water does.

As David Rothenberg says in his introduction to *The Book of Music and Nature*, “Music could be a model for learning to perceive the surrounding world by listening, not only by naming or explaining.”<sup>6</sup> In this case, that learning experience comes not just from the audience listening to my piece or the performers interpreting it, but also from my own experience of having acknowledged my country’s natural landscape so as to understand its dynamics and make it part of my memories and main language when writing about home.

Some of my best memories are from my choir experience. Singing in a group requires a constant flow between the self and others. *Fragmentos de lluvia* is, therefore, a very loose and improvisational graphic score. Readers performing this book must listen to each other and enter in at the right moments based on this flowing awareness of community.

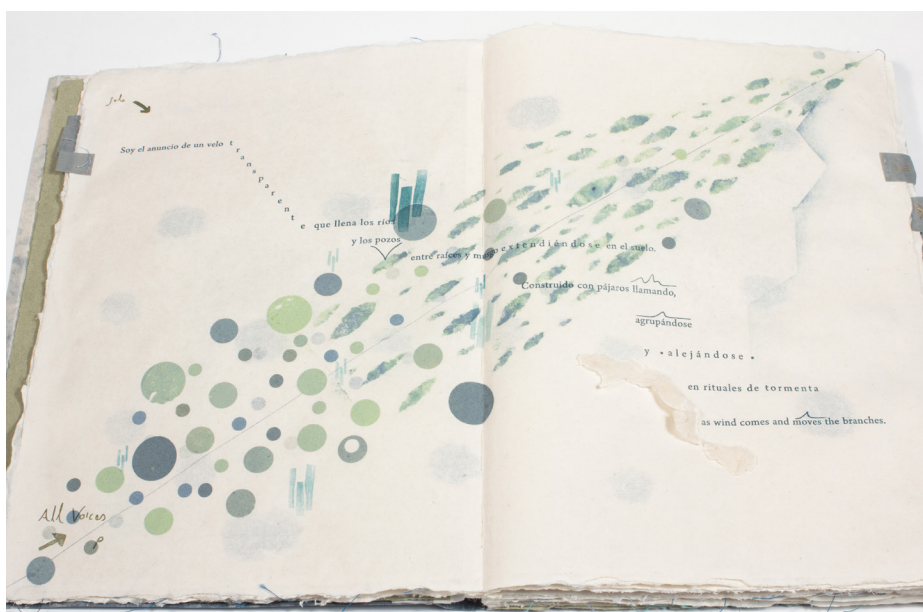
The scores contain paintings made with geometrical or organic shapes that represent a new language devised by me. These symbols allow for the performance to take on the improvisational quality of water. Circles represent breathing, like lungs opening and

closing proportionally; leaf-like shapes are whistles representing birds, because both birds and leaves depart from trees by flying away; lines symbolize melodies flowing like lines in the water of a river.

The instrument inclusions, played by the singers, are objects made with paper using its acoustic properties. Paper can do so much: it can be as hard as wood, crisp, or cloth-like. The paper instruments are extensions of the score, as they are notated in it. The book itself is also an instrument, as the score calls for the sounds created by rubbing the book pages between your fingers.

*Fragmentos de lluvia* is a piece for four or more voices and a solo reciter/singer. For

Fig. 6: Ceballos, Fragmentos de lluvia (2021). Handmade paper and letterpress printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Spread showing the type of notation with geometric shapes distributed on the page according to the concept of the text.



the first performance of this piece, I was the soloist and director, so what I composed I communicated as I imagined.

It has very specific indications in some areas and aspects, and some more loose and improvisational ones in others. Although this book is editioned and can also be performed

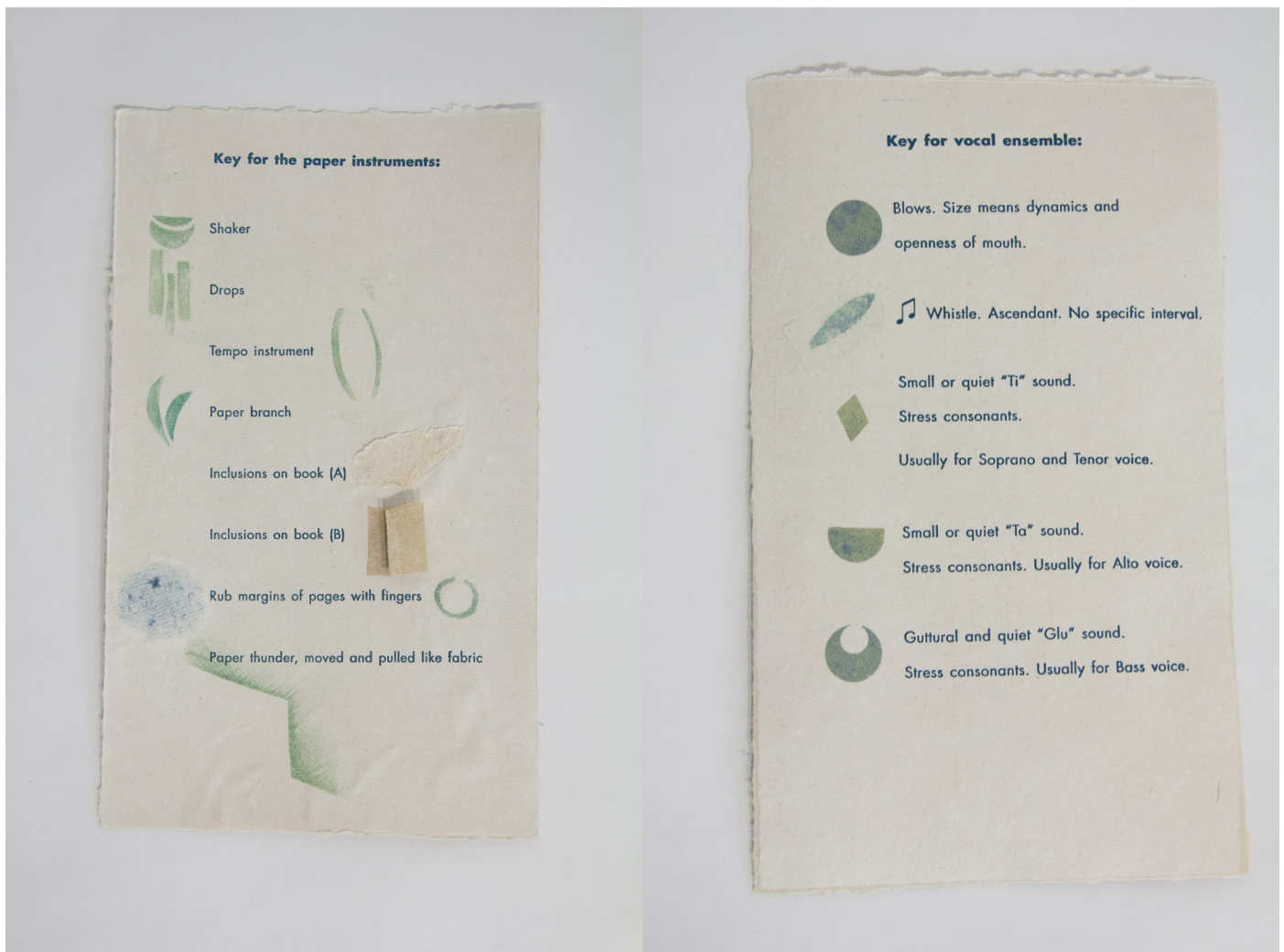


Figure 7: Ceballos, *Fragmentos de lluvia* (2021). Handmade paper and letterpress printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Keys for vocal ensemble and paper instruments.

multiple times, it has no specific outcome that can be repeated. I wanted each performance of this piece to be different as I wanted the performers to be a part of the understanding of the book.

A very important part of this work is for it to be shared.

Fig. 8: Ceballos, *Fragmentos de lluvia* (2021). Handmade paper and letterpress printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Tabs.



#### NEW PRACTICES AND EXPLORATIONS OF THE SELF

My newest work still explores performance, but has shifted more toward the personal/individual and focuses on the body and its connections with the book. For the last couple of years, I have experienced loss in many ways: loss of friends and family, but also experiences of mourning the loss of childhood.

My grandparents passed away months apart shortly after my return to Colombia. And while I felt that greatly, my family had been feeling their world, memories, and faculties diminishing for years.

*Espacio* (2022) is a book/box/house/jewelry box about how the space we occupy can feel as if it is becoming smaller as we age (figs. 11 and 12).

The book, in the shape of a box and with the colors of my grandpa's old house, behaves like a changing and worn-out body. It moves in time as it opens in different ways with drawers, doors, lids, and trays. It performs the weakness and shrinking of self, as the writing that moves is contained in the shape of loss.

#### ROTURAS, THE TEARING OF THE BODY

My most recent work, *Roturas* (2024), is a long scroll that represents the almost endless nature of skin (fig. 13). It expresses anxiety and loss of oneself as it cycles through hand-

Fig. 9: Ceballos, *Fragmentos de lluvia* (2021). Handmade paper. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Display of paper instruments, each with a sewn tag displaying its corresponding symbol in the score.







Figure 10: Ceballos, *Fragmentos de lluvia* (2021). Handmade paper and photopolymer plates with letterpress printing. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Image of the song with classical notation showing the different voices.

written text, in Spanish and filled with lines, and drawings or paintings of geographical accidents.

I have dealt with skin problems all my life. I feel like it's also part of the craftsman's life, to tear my hands and skin for and during the act of creation. *Roturas* is digitally printed on Japanese paper, to show the thinness, fragility, and brittleness of this material covering our bodies.

The lines around the text represent a dance that shows different “mental sounds” that help with the emotions the text is transmitting. These lines are meant as directions for the reader to change their voice when reading this work aloud. I decided not to include any key or instructions as I want the reader to find their own voice to express anxiety.

The scroll has the potential to be read aloud, contained in the box, or opened in a long space with the body and the voice moving on the floor.

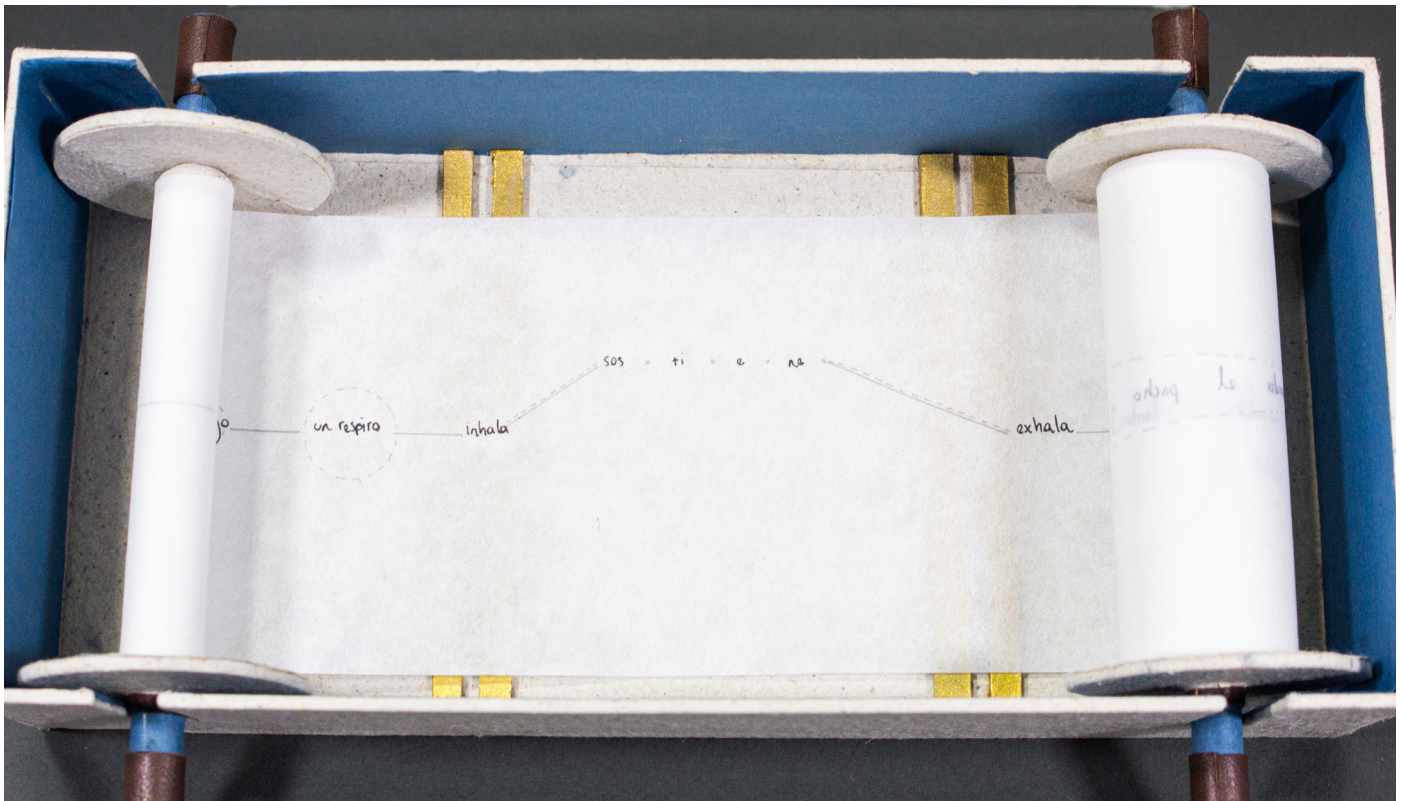
Inside the box where the scroll is housed and displayed, there are two pieces: one is a series of embroidered concentric circles, and the other a carved piece of paper that shows a kind of lake or riverlike form. These two pieces represent a mantra I repeat to calm my hands, mind, and skin.

This work, whether read silently or aloud, demands we look inside to our own hands, spine, skin, and soul.

My research started with the performance of my own voice and body. I then explored ways a book can be experienced and performed by many

Figure 11: Ceballos, *Espacio* (2022). Leather and paper. Collection of the artist, Bogotá, Colombia. Picture of the box, closed.





voices and bodies. I have now returned to the experience of my own voice and body and how it mirrors the body of a book as I move through life.

It seems creativity moves in circles, waving through our life like sound or water, emphasizing the same beats.

#### NOTES

1. *Tripa* is the Spanish word for text block. It also means tripe.
2. *Copetón* is the Spanish word for the Rufous-collared sparrow.
3. *Cordillera* is the Spanish word for mountain range.
4. Galia Ospina, *El Libro álbum: Experiencias de creación y mundos posibles de la lectura en voz alta* (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2016), 4.
5. This is a Korean technique in which handmade paper is massaged and manipulated with the hands to the point of becoming fabric-like.
6. David Rothenberg, and Marta Ulvaeus. *The Book of Music and Nature: An Anthology of Sounds, Words, Thoughts*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 10.