

José Antonio Hernández-Díez. 'I will fear no evil'

Latitudes (Max Andrews & Mariana Cánepa Luna)

Outside the doorway of the deconsecrated sixteenth-century church that formed part of Barcelona's Convent dels Àngels there once stood the stone figure of a dog, standing upright on its hind legs. Two separate legends account for its existence, as recorded by ethnologist and folklorist Joan Amades in the 1950s.¹ A boorish man would routinely interrupt the services and torment the church congregation, it is said. He was punished by being turned into a dog. The other version states that the canine figure commemorates the thwarting of a robbery. The church once displayed an image of Saint Roch, the patron saint of dogs, accompanied by a hound. It is said that the prospective thieves were frightened away as the image miraculously began to bark. (The supernatural mythology of the chapel does not cease there – in 1627 an image of Christ began to sweat blood profusely.)² That José Antonio Hernández-Díez (b. Caracas, Venezuela, 1964) had already been dealing with Catholic belief and superstition in his art – and moreover, specifically addressing canine veneration – is much more than an uncanny coincidence for his exhibition at MACBA's Convent dels Àngels in 2016.

There has always been a profoundly 'hauntological' dimension to Hernández-Díez's art that has not been given its due. The concept of 'hauntology', a play on 'ontology', was coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Spectres de Marx*, 1993 (*Specters of Marx*, 1994) in which he proposes that Marxism would continue to haunt history in the same way that 'the spectre of communism' was described as haunting Europe in the opening of Marx's 1848 *The Communist Manifesto*.³ Hauntology accounts for how ghosts seem to come from the past and yet appear in the present. This summons a temporal paradox, Derrida contends, in that a ghostly return is also an apparition for the first time. Hauntology extends arguments long-established in Derrida's writings around the deconstruction of a dubious 'metaphysics of presence' that privileges meaning secured through a physical body or voice. Instead, hauntology richly suggests itself as both a theme and a practice that is excised by spectrality, imperfect memory, disembodiment, temporal displacements, and, as it has been applied by theorist Mark Fisher, the uncanniness of recorded media.⁴ Hauntological spectres come to trouble us from a place of deficit between the present and the future that was imagined in the past.⁵

No temeré mal alguno (I will fear no evil) has a retrospective dimension by focusing on Hernández-Díez's first experimental works with videography in the late 1980s and early 1990s and early iconic vitrine-based works, alongside a new project made for the occasion.

1 Joan Amades, *Històries i llegendes de Barcelona* (Stories and Legends of Barcelona). Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1984, p. 540.

2 Ibid., p. 543.

3 '...I have just remembered what must have been haunting my memory: the first noun of the Manifesto, and this time in the Singular, is "specter" – "A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism.'" Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 2.

4 See for example: Mark Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', 2013, *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, no. 5(2), pp. 42–55.

5 Ironically, it is worth noting that writing about hauntology and art in 2016 is already out-of-date. Mark Fisher's work on hauntology in music and film dates back to 2006.

See, for example, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007252.html>

The presence of ghosts and bodily organs in this phase of Hernández-Díez's out-of-joint works – videographic spectres, disembodied voices, preserved creatures, hearts and skin – is only enhanced by the somewhat necromantic aspect of the fact that several of his works have been reconstructed, as if brought back to life for the present exhibition.⁶

Two works in the exhibition – *San Guinefort* (Saint Guinefort, 1991) and *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción aleja a los demonios* (The shining of the Holy union wards off demons, 1991) – were initially presented in Hernández-Díez's first major monographic exhibition, which took place at the Sala RG, Casa Rómulo Gallegos, Caracas, in 1991 and was entitled *San Guinefort y otras devociones* (Saint Guinefort and other devotions).⁷ Also featured is *Sagrado corazón activo* (Active Sacred Heart, 1991) which was first exhibited a few months later.⁸ This heralded what the artist termed a 'New Christian Iconography', offering – as artist-colleague Meyer Vaisman described – 'a techno-pop view of Catholicism's most beloved symbols'.⁹ This disquieting and seductive body of work deals with the application of communications and medical technology and its interlacing with systems of paranormal belief, most prominently Christian theology. Moreover, in a similar function to hauntology, these works inhabit a kind of temporal disjuncture, as if future relics. The particularly baroque brand of Latin-American Catholicism that was constituted through received European Colonial narratives, as well as forcibly depriving native peoples of their history and beliefs, returns in Hernández-Díez's art as if a ghost and yet an entirely novel phenomenon.¹⁰ His works accordingly negotiate the making of art as a practice burdened by opacity, veneration and mortality, as much as by its stake in a living and continually reanimated culture.

Neither ironic nor profane, the notion of a New Christian Iconography led Hernández-Díez to create a series of macabre works that hinge on death, consciousness and resurrection. Adopting the form of devotional objects or technological apparitions, the works seem variously like archaeological finds from some electro-spiritual clinic, positivist science-fiction proposals for a future religion or props from an illusionist theatrical sideshow. They offer implicit theses about the meaning and significance of what has been believed before and expectations of what may be believed next, as if acting as overburdened pious interfaces between the wonders of the rational material world and determined faith in the spiritual narratives that seem to escape it.

Accordingly, *No temeré mal alguno* deals with hauntology as a curatorial response to the site of the Convent dels Àngels, and as a 'reading' of Hernández-Díez's work – perhaps both in the psychic's sense, as well as in a diligent attention to its textual references. The prominent inclusion of *La hermandad* (The Brotherhood, 1994) – perhaps his most renowned work – is thus haunted as much by the cynanthropy and phantasmal barking of the church of the Convent dels Àngels as by his lesser-known earlier 'electrified Gothic' video sculptures and

6 Derrida repeatedly evokes William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx* and Hamlet's assertion that 'the time is out of joint' (*Hamlet*, Act I, scene 5, 186–190) appears on the title page.

7 Sala RG, Casa Rómulo Gallegos, Caracas, 25 July–25 August 1991. Curated by Luis Ángel Duque. Catalogue: <http://av.celarg.org.ve/JAHernandezDiez/HernandezDiez.pdf>

8 *Sagrado corazón activo* was first shown in September 1991 in a group exhibition titled *El espíritu de los tiempos* (The Spirit of the Times) at the Ateneo de Caracas, although it was included in the checklist of the Sala RG exhibition.

9 Meyer Vaisman, 'Openings: José Antonio Hernández-Díez', *Artforum*, April 1992, p. 92.

10 The notion of the contemporary art of the Americas in terms of the 'integration and assimilation of the European Baroque' was the underpinning of the exhibition *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* (Museum of Art San Diego, 2000) that toured extensively throughout the U.S. and Canada, and which featured fourteen artists including nine works by Hernández-Díez.

New Christian Iconography. It is spectral dogs, and a hauntology rather than a chronology, then, that leads us first to *La hermandad*, in fact the most recent of the pre-existing works included in the exhibition. Dogs play a compelling, clamorous role in *La hermandad*. It comprises three monitors on wooden tables that show a startling trilogy of short video loops, while featuring a novel and distinctively visceral art material – fried skin. As we shall see, *La hermandad* is preoccupied by many of the same conceptual concerns that were present in Hernández-Díez’s previous work – including its obsession with the precarious and often violent boundary between life and death. It also shares a certain pared-down aesthetic and formal concision. This work is significant in that it moved decisively away from what had been explicitly religious or gothic subject matter. In the video-loops of *La hermandad* we witness strips of pig skin being fried in oil: the preparation of *chicharrones*, the cheap and popular street snack consumed across Latin America, becomes a metaphorical birth. On the second monitor, these greasy pork rinds are then equipped with wheels and used as improbable skateboards around the city streets: a journey through life. Finally, as seen on the third monitor, the skin-boards are devoured by hungry dogs: an untimely and grisly death. Dogs here are neither familiar emblems of fidelity nor are they friendly protectors – these feral street dogs are more like Cerberus, the ferocious guardian of the entrance to the underworld in Greek mythology.¹¹ The monitors are framed by a large scaffolding structure from which further skin skateboards hang, sweating fat while waiting as if on a production line for their inevitable fate. Yet describing the work in the terms of an order of events is a narrative fallacy. The video-loops are undeniably simultaneous – the violence of birth, life and death is occurring all at once at the same time. Furthermore, in linking food to the disintegration of flesh, the body that has lost its form and integrity, *La hermandad* reflects an archaic form of a key critical trope that gained traction in contemporary art in the 1990s – the abject.¹² *La hermandad* marks a break, or at least a hinge, in Hernández-Díez’s practice that led to a series of works (beyond the purview of the *No temeré mal alguno* exhibition) addressing sports, consumerism and urban youth culture. Accordingly, *No temeré mal alguno* is in some senses a pre-history of what led up to *La hermandad*, which prompts attention, not only to the work itself, but to the cultural moment into which it was received in 1994.

Although we are talking only about a little more than twenty years ago, it is worth stressing that not only the scale, but the discursive context of what we now know as contemporary art was tellingly different from today. Ideas of contemporary art as a *global* language, a multicultural territory to be mapped, as well as the notion of the large-scale group exhibition as an authored thesis, were being first proposed and tested. The dominance of artists from Europe and the U.S. started to be actively countered.¹³ *La hermandad* was originally commissioned for the fifty-four artist exhibition *Cocido y crudo* (The Cooked and the Raw) at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, in 1994. Its American curator, Dan Cameron, would later present a Hernández-Díez monographic show at the New Museum

11 The Greek myth of Actaeon is also brought to mind – the hunter was torn apart by his own rabid dogs as a punishment for looking at the naked goddess Artemis. See, for example, Wendy Doniger (ed.): *Encyclopedia of World Religions*. Merriam-Webster, 1999, p. 10.

12 The key exhibition here is perhaps the Whitney Museum’s exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, 1993, which drew on the abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*.

13 The titles alone of the 1st Gwangju Biennale in 1995 (*Beyond the Borders*) and the 23rd Bienal de São Paulo in 1996 (*Universalis*) are telling. Both featured the work of Hernández-Díez. *Beyond the Borders* ‘conveyed a message of global citizenship that transcended divisions between ideologies, territories, religion, race, culture, humanity, and the arts.’

of Contemporary Art, New York, in 2003.¹⁴ *Cocido y crudo* was significant both nationally and internationally.¹⁵ Cameron reflected on ideas developed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Le Cru et le cuit* (The Raw and the Cooked, 1964) a study that addressed mythology and the confrontation between ‘advanced’ and ‘primitive’ societies through culinary and sensory terms. Western societies (the cooked, the civilised) are contrasted with ‘the other’ (the raw, the primitive) in Lévi-Strauss, an opposition that Cameron aimed to contest within artistic production in his approach to *Cocido y crudo*, suggesting instead that colonialism implied an exchange of multiple cultural contexts. As curator Jesús Fuenmayor later noted, the use of fried pork rinds in *La hermandad* could be read as a vernacular commentary on the Spanish legacy when seen from Venezuela, yet from a Spanish perspective they also allude to popular culinary culture from the south of Spain.¹⁶ Indeed, many cultures have a version of this frugal snack. Cameron’s critical position proposed that artists think globally while working with local concepts and materials, and with the inclusion of *La hermandad*, Hernández-Díez was nevertheless represented as a cosmopolitan Latin American artist being seen to forge ‘indigenous’ tradition with international legibility, gritty street culture with universal metaphors of mortality.¹⁷ These are readings that seem reasonable on the face of it, yet, given the vicissitudes of globalisation and the amplification of post-colonial discourse well beyond poetic pluralism and exchange, seem at least dated today. Hernández-Díez has always refused a straightforward contextualisation as a Venezuelan voice, complicated by the fact that, soon after his relocation from Caracas to Barcelona in the late 1990s, explicit references to his native Latin America in his work and a ‘poor’ aesthetic all but disappear in favour of highly-finished sculptural and photographic productions. Yet already in early 1990s, we find neither an argument about parochialism or internationalism, but something altogether more strange and disquieting, which in any case derives from a specific history not in Latin America, but in medieval France. Dogs lead us there.

San Guinefort alludes to one of the more obscure intersections of Catholic history and folk tradition. Writing around 1260, the Inquisitor and Dominican friar Étienne de Bourbon related his investigation into the veneration of Saint Guinefort in the Dombes region of France.¹⁸ He discovered that this supposed Saint was, in fact, a dog. The account he disclosed

14 José Antonio Hernández-Díez, 11 July–21 September 2003, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. In fact, Alice Yang and guest curators Celeste Olalquiaga and Lisa Cartwright had included Hernández-Díez in *The Final Frontier*, a group exhibition at the New Museum in 1993.

15 *Cocido y crudo* ran from 14 December 1994 to 6 March 1995. The exhibition received a mixed critical response, yet its influence in Spain in introducing many artists little-known in the country is undeniable – these included Janine Antoni, Xu Bing, Damien Hirst, Paul McCarthy, Gabriel Orozco, Doris Salcedo, Kiki Smith, Rirkrit Tiravanija, et al. (See for example Anna Maria Guasch, *El arte del siglo XX en sus exposiciones. 1945-1995*. Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1997.) *Cocido y crudo* closely followed Hernández-Díez’s participation (along with fifteen other artists represented in the Madrid exhibition) in the landmark *Aperto’93: Emergency/Emergenza* organised by Helena Kontova with twelve other curators for the 45th Venice Biennale (1993).

16 Jesús Fuenmayor, *José Antonio Hernández-Díez*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, p. 25 [exh.cat.].

17 The framing of the cultural moment as a global crucible is palpable in the catalogue’s list of ‘Parallel Exhibitions’ (Exposiciones paralelas): ‘This list represents an attempt to acknowledge those international group exhibitions which have come to have an effect on the shaping of this project, especially in terms of the artists invited on the present occasion. In so doing, it is hoped that the chain of curatorial undertakings which forms a link between curators and critics working worldwide can be more easily perceived as a body of visual history from which our present-day notion of art is forged.’ See Dan Cameron (ed.): *Cocido y crudo*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 1995 [exh.cat.].

18 The story is recounted, in Latin, in Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d’Étienne de Bourbon dominicain du XIIIe siècle*, édition de Albert Lecoy de la Marche, Paris, Henri Loones, 1877, pp. 325–29. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k206395z/f377.image>

was that a knight and his wife had one day left their greyhound Guinefort to guard their baby. When they returned to the castle they found the cradle empty and Guinefort covered in blood. Assuming it had murdered the baby, the knight hastily killed the dog, only later realising his error. Guinefort had in fact fought off a snake in order to save the child, who was found unharmed.¹⁹ Guinefort was buried unceremoniously in the forest outside the castle walls. Hearing of the martyred dog, local people began to believe in its power to protect children and began to bring their sick infants to the grave. Étienne de Bourbon was horrified to discover the strength of the superstition that had taken root. Children were being left overnight by Guinefort's grave in the belief that he would rid them of spirits, and several babies had died as a consequence. Defending the orthodoxy of the church, the friar had the heretical remains of the greyhound dug up and destroyed, razed the forest and outlawed the canine cult, yet there is evidence of its persistence into the nineteenth century.²⁰ The episode is worth recounting in detail, as previous accounts of it in relation to Hernández-Díez's work have been misleading.²¹

San Guinefort presents an ambiguous reformulation of this medieval episode in the form of a sculptural symbol that introduces medical science into the equation. A taxidermy dog is displayed in a clear vitrine as if in an incubator, an isolation chamber or a modern reliquary. Yet it appears that the legend of Saint Guinefort has been resurrected in the form of a lowly stray dog rather than a noble greyhound. The medical apparatus that entombs the animal suggests that it is somehow in a state of uncertainty between the living and the dead, bringing to mind contemporary ethical and faith-based narratives about rights to life and death – as well as the agency of non-human animals.²² Rubber gloves attached to the vitrine attest to the belief that holy relics must be touched for an effective transfer of sacred power to take place, a practice that began to wane in the thirteenth century with the proliferation of images of saints giving new prominence to viewing and sight.²³ Yet the protective gloves, normally used to handle hazardous materials, and the sealed chamber also suggest that the dog-relic is

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, hosts an English translation: <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/guinefort.asp>

- 19 Folktales featuring the central motif of a rash killing of a faithful animal exist in several variations in different countries and cultures. 'The Brahmin and the Mongoose' is one of many animal stories in the ancient Indian fable collection *The Panchatantra*, while the story of Prince Llewellyn and his loyal dog Gelert hails from north-west Wales. These tales are classified as type 178A under the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale classification system. See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004.
- 20 All that exists as of summer 2014, as the writers can attest, is a metal sign on the road between Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne and Villars-les-Dombes, which marks the 'Bois de Saint-Guinefort' with a few words about the canine legend.
- 21 Dan Cameron's essay in *José Antonio Hernández-Díez*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003, erroneously states that the Guinefort legend is 'about a dog believed to have saved the lives of an entire village' (p. 19).
- 22 As Meyer Vaisman describes in his sparkling *Artforum* text: 'Connected to the box was an oxygen tank: technology charged with the miraculous responsibility of reversing fortune, and bringing the lifesaver back to life – as much an act of faith as has always been. Hernández-Díez's gothic, grisly worldview is unique in its involvement with religion (a practice that most artists avoid, and with good reason), but his use of technology runs parallel to Matthew Barney and Allan Rath's among others. He lives and works in the valley known as Santiago de León de Caracas, yet his work looks researched and produced in a different valley – Silicon – and thought out in yet another – Death.' See Vaisman, op. cit.
- 23 Constance Classen explains that, 'From the thirteenth century on... direct contact with a relic was no longer deemed absolutely necessary. This change in attitude indicates a transition from a more concrete to a more diffuse understanding of the nature of spirituality. The idea of saints' bodies containing a holy essence that must be touched for an effective transfer of sacred power to occur was gradually being supplanted by a notion of saintly virtue being accessible anywhere, through intangible as well as tangible means.' Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*. University of Illinois Press, 2012, pp. 149–150.

contaminated – indeed, fear of the Black Death in Europe throughout the later 1300s was also was a factor in the decline of the religious importance of tactility.

San Guinefort is one of Hernández-Díez's most multifarious, bizarre and provocative works. Now on long-term loan to the MACBA collection, *San Guinefort* was the centrepiece of his 1991 exhibition *San Guinefort y otras devociones*, before its inclusion in the group exhibition *The Final Frontier* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, in 1993. The story of Saint Guinefort speaks about what kind of meanings and narratives are legitimate – those that emerge through highly-specific localised circumstances or those that are imposed by macro-orthodoxy and dogma. Moreover, *San Guinefort* suggests an extremely close-up, reduced-scale form of analysis that seems ill-suited to characterisations of Hernández-Díez's art as an 'international language' adopting universalist themes.²⁴ Indeed, given the Guinefort legend's idiosyncratic motif of forbidden medieval beliefs and its extraordinary single source (the account of the Inquisitor Étienne de Bourbon), it is ripe for a microhistorical approach rather than a global one.²⁵

Sagrado corazón activo was first shown in September 1991 in a group exhibition titled *El espíritu de los tiempos* (The Spirit of the Times) at the Galería Los Espacios Cálidos at the Ateneo de Caracas, shortly following *San Guinefort y otras devociones* and clearly belongs to the same body of work dealing with the symbology and spiritual practices of Catholicism.²⁶ The Sacred Heart refers to the devotion of the physical heart of Jesus Christ as a symbol of a follower's belief in his divine love and compassion and often appears in depictions of Jesus as a heart that radiates light. As in *San Guinefort*, allusions to medical technology are fused with religious precepts. A cow's heart appears to float in the centre of a fluid-filled transparent crucifix, like a clinical altarpiece.²⁷ Rigged up to medical equipment as if on a life-support machine, the heart appears to beat. This visceral work deals with a key point of difference in theologies related with transubstantiation and 'real presence' – the notion that Jesus Christ is actually somehow present in a fleshy way in the bread and wine of the Eucharist versus being a symbolic or a metaphorical presence. Hernández-Díez extends this point of contention into the realm of the biomechanical, imagining an almost robotic presence with a contrastingly organic and emotional core. *Sagrado corazón activo* departs from the head-in-a-jar trope of science fiction and surgical horror in which the desire for immortality has resulted in nothing but an immobile yet nourished brain.²⁸ Yet in place of a bodiless individual capable only of

24 Gerardo Mosquera's essay in *José Antonio Hernández-Díez*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003, for example, concludes: 'In his art... context and culture are understood in their broadest definitions and are internalized in the creation of the work... Like other diverse contemporary practices, Hernández-Díez's work concurs in redesigning art's "international" language and simultaneously delves into personal obsessions and current "global" themes.' (p. 12)

25 We refer here to the tradition of microhistory that emerged in the late seventies and eighties, particularly following the appearance of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Jean-Claude Schmitt's exhaustive *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, took precisely this approach.

26 See María Elena Ramos, 'El espíritu de los tiempos: Y por qué José Antonio Hernández-Díez', in *El espíritu de los tiempos*, Ateneo de Caracas, 1991. *San Guinefort y otras devociones* included the closely related *Sagrado corazón vídeo* (1991) a clear acrylic crucifix with a monitor at its centre showing footage of a two-hour heart operation.

27 Incidentally, *San Guinefort y otras devociones* predates the first formaldehyde works of Damien Hirst. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) was first exhibited in 1992. *Mother and Child (Divided)* (1993) was first shown at *Aperto '93: Emergency/Emergenza* at the 45th Venice Biennale, 1993, which also included Hernández-Díez (with *La caja*, 1993).

28 The 'severed heads' motif dates back to at least 1930, and Olaf Stapledon's novel *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future*. See also Kathleen Woodward, 'From Virtual Cyborgs to Biological Time Bombs: Technocriticism and the Material Body', in Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery (eds.): *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*. New York: Dia Center for the Arts / Bay Press, 1994.

thought and knowledge, the artist has apparently devised a perpetual mechanism of pure love, unconditional passion and truth. *Sagrado corazón activo* seems to inhabit the peculiarly disjointed temporality that is proper to hauntology – a techno-medical vision of a science-gone-mad future within an ancient symbolic past. Yet by centring on the cardiac organ, the device alludes to the seemingly-miraculous development of human organ transplantation, a procedure that involves specifically Christian archetypes of sacrifice on the part of the donor and a cheating of death for the receiver. Technology and religion converge with the material reality and symbolic surplus of the body.

Hernández-Díez's work shadows a formative period of cultural criticism in the 1990s regarding biotechnology and cybernetics. Much of this field is rooted in feminist biologist Donna Haraway's seminal 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', which envisioned a convergence of the body and technology in the figure of the cyborg, a hybrid that also represents the possibility of a post-gender world. Haraway characterises how 'Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between the natural and the artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed... Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.'²⁹ *San Guinefort* and *Sagrado corazón activo* imagine a kind of folklore of medical or biotechnology; by adopting monitors and screens in his art, Hernández-Díez had already been exploring what would prove to be an even more prescient discourse of representation, being and knowledge – electronic communications technology.

The artist's earliest works from the late 1980s take the form of single-channel video-loop sculptures that evoke the notion of electronic moving pictures as haunted and magical phenomena. Made at a time when the domestic sphere had been recently colonised by the arrival of mass market home video, these works re-articulate preoccupations long held in the public imagination about the relationship between the body, disbelief and technology. Employing projectors – but more pointedly as we shall see, monitors – these works crystallise an ambiguous status in relation to the mythos of video, cinema and the sculptural use of the cathode ray tube – a technology that was already almost obsolete in the late 1980s. This ambiguity is thrown into even deeper perspective as we revisit it more than twenty-five years since its inception. Drawing on genres such as literary horror and Romanticism (*Annabel Lee*, 1988), illusionism and special effects (*Houdini*, 1989), as much as the contemporaneous concerns of cyborg theory, these brilliantly inventive works imagined video art as a form of electrified Gothic with privileged access beyond the rational world. They foreshadow many of the concerns that were inherited and extended by Hernández-Díez's first sculptural works from the 1990s, as we have already seen in part – the relationship between superstition and orthodoxy, anatomy and technology, sacred symbolism, and the transgressive place held for children and animals in devotional consciousness.

Houdini, 1989: Submerged in a tank of water, the tube of a black-and-white monitor plays a video loop of Hernández-Díez appearing to perform himself the notorious Chinese Water Torture Cell trick that Harry Houdini introduced to the public in 1912. The Hungarian-American magician and showman was famous as both a master escapologist and a debunker of Spiritualist mediums whose claims to be able to contact the dead he fiercely disputed. Such is the mythology surrounding Houdini and the iconic Chinese Water Torture Cell illusion that it is often stated that he died performing it.³⁰ With his ankles secured, he would be locked

29 Donna J. Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 152.

30 The falsehood that Houdini died while performing in the Chinese Water Torture Cell (provoked, perhaps, by the 1953 movie *Houdini* starring Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh) is repeated in Jesús Fuenmayor's essay in *José Antonio*

upside-down into a water-filled tank, his entire body visible through the glass until curtains were closed around it. Several anxious minutes would pass until Houdini emerged triumphantly from behind the curtains. Making explicit reference to outmoded corporeal punishment and execution, Houdini's tricks frequently offered a spectacle of vicarious self-liberation from the barbarities of the past.³¹ Putting himself in chains in the place of Houdini, Hernández-Díez devised a cruel and technically confounding self-portrait that imagines the monitor as a kind of performative torture device, the video-loop as a mechanism of endless suspense and astonishment.³² Escapology is metaphorically seductive, both as an actual escape from physical bonds and as an emancipatory tactic or strategy of elusiveness – 'doing-otherwise' as an artistic competence.³³ Houdini positioned his acts 'beyond explanation' yet without recourse to the paranormal. Indirectly, too, *Houdini* introduces a powerful and sometimes disquieting refrain of Hernández-Díez's early works, not least with *San Guinefort* – death, the status of children and the innocence of infancy. The best trick of the magician is the transformation of the audience from mere adulthood, the world of knowing and understanding, into children – innocent in awe, delight and wonder.

Annabel Lee is a diorama representing a cross-section of a miniature grave site – complete with tombstone and wreath. Beneath the earth, a video-loop shows the figure of a child in a convulsive trance, as if buried alive in a coffin. Here television appears to have inherited the notion of haunted media – yet this disturbing disembodied presence does not speak through the electronic device, but lives in perpetual suffering inside of it, in a form of tortured televisual oblivion. The title makes reference to a 1849 ballad of sorrow and grief by Edgar Allan Poe, the American Romantic writer best known for his mystery and horror tales. In the poem Annabel Lee is the innocent child-bride of the heartbroken narrator who died of a chilling wind that was sent by angels who were jealous of their mortal love. Buried in a tomb by the sea, Annabel and her memory continue to have an extraordinarily powerful effect on her husband years later. She is said to immortalise Poe's love and premature loss of Virginia Clemm, who married the 27-year old Poe at the age of 13.³⁴ Like the beating heart of *Sagrado corazón activo*, an all-enduring love appears to survive far beyond death. Taphophobia, the fear of being buried alive, was a widespread and not completely irrational anxiety before the advent of modern medicine. Several of Poe's short stories – including *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and *The Premature Burial* (1844) – established this founding motif of horror fiction.

Hernández-Díez, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003, p. 23. In fact Houdini died of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix on Halloween 1926. See for example William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

- 31 Houdini's antique devices included: 'a cruel iron body cage used to punish witches in colonial New England; a still more pitiless Scottish body cage... [and] ships irons once used to hold mutineers on the high seas.' John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*. New York: Macmillan, 2002.
- 32 Yet Boris Groys suggests that the video-loop is (secular) contemporary art's instantiation of the 'wasted, suspended, non-historical time' that characterises the present: 'The inherent repetitiveness of contemporary time-based art distinguishes it sharply from happenings and performances of the 1960s. A documented activity is not any more a unique, isolated performance – an individual, authentic, original event that takes place in the here-and-now. Rather, this activity is itself repetitive – even before it was documented by, let us say, a video running in a loop.' Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', *e-flux Journal*, no. 11, 2009.
- 33 See 'Escapology', in Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2014.
- 34 See Dawn B. Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 25.

As Mark Fisher has noted, it perhaps comes as no surprise that Poe wrote one of the earliest essays on photography in 1840.³⁵ Yet we can only image what he would have made of television and video. As Fisher writes of audio recording: ‘Modernity was built upon “technologies that made us all ghosts”, and postmodernity could be defined as the succumbing of historical time to the spectral time of recording devices. Postmodern time presupposes ubiquitous recording technology, but postmodernity screens out the spectrality, naturalising the uncanniness of the recording apparatuses. Hauntology restores the uncanniness of recording by making the recorded surface audible again.’³⁶ The inherently uncanny quality of videography is that its moving pictures and sounds will outlive us – it is already ghostly. Moreover, with the widespread arrival of home video in the 1980s, the television set was liberated from commercial broadcasting. Pre-recorded tapes could be played back at a later date: the domestic cathode ray tube set became a ghost box and a tool for shifting time.

As media scholar Jeffrey Sconce has persuasively argued, ‘new’ electronic media and telecommunications innovations have been closely allied with paranormal and spiritual phenomena since the development of the telegraph during the nineteenth century and the way in which it was associated with the rise and methods of the Spiritualist movement. Yet after over 150 years of electronic communication, mystical powers are still so often attached to what are ultimately very material technologies. ‘What exactly is the status of the worlds created by radio, television, and computers?’ Sconce asks.³⁷ ‘Are there invisible entities adrift in the ether, entire other electronic realms coursing through the wired networks of the world? Sounds and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form. By bringing this spectral world into the home, the TV set in particular can take on the appearance of a haunted apparatus.’³⁸ The box-form of the monitor, more than a flat screen, emphasises this eerie presence of possession or ‘ghosts in the machine’, implying that something is inside the cabinet and that it serves as an uncanny gateway to a sovereign electrogenetic world that is somehow beyond the material realm that we mortals live in. Spirits did not communicate through televisions but instead seemed to live inside them.

With *Houdini* and *Annabel Lee*, Hernández-Díez brought magic, entertainment and anxious literature from a previous era into the field of Latin American video art of the 1980s, but moreover, into a whole conceptual topography of the public imaginary and popular culture regarding media. Both inhabit the uncanny properties of their media, yet extend what Deirdre Boyle has described as the ‘deconstruction of the television set as material object and the re-representation of the TV signal as material’.³⁹ Yet their discursive allusions give them a different emphasis to the more formalist and abstract explorations represented by an apparent antecedent such as Nam June Paik’s *TV Cross* (1966) – a crucifix of monitors that displays electronic feedback. With *La caja* (The Box), 1991, Hernández-Díez adopted an altogether distinct agenda with a statement about social distress and real horror. In *La caja* a cardboard box appears to expel images of children who tumble to the ground as if rubbish being

35 ‘The results of the invention cannot, even remotely, be seen – but all experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely.’ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Daguerreotype’, *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, 15 January 1840.
<http://www.eapoe.org/works/mabbott/csb43co2.htm>

36 Mark Fisher, ‘The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology’, 2013, op. cit., no. 5(2): pp. 42–55.

37 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham NC: Duke University, 2000, p. 4.

38 Ibid.

39 Deirdre Boyle, ‘From Portapak to Camcorder: A Brief History of Guerrilla Television’, *Journal of Film and Video*, no. 44, 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1992), pp. 67–79.

discarded.⁴⁰ This Dantean vision referred to a dire and still contemporary situation – the plight of so-called *gamines* (street urchins) in Caracas and in Bogotá, where the work was first shown in 1992, as part of the touring exhibition of Latin American art *Ante América* (Regarding America).⁴¹ (It was later exhibited at *Aperto '93: Emergency/Emergenza* at the 45th Venice Biennale, 1993.) A deplorable feature of many big cities globally, *gamines* are children who through poverty and conflict have been abandoned by society and pushed onto the streets in order to meet basic needs for survival. Often embroiled in crime, drugs and prostitution, street children have frequently been viewed as subhuman and unworthy of basic rights, becoming targets of vigilante groups, gangs and extrajudicial efforts to ‘clean’ the streets.

Taking its title from a Venezuelan colloquialism meaning that someone has a wonderful opportunity that they are nevertheless complaining about, *Vas pa'l cielo y vas llorando* (You're going to heaven and you're crying, 1992) presents the video illusion of the spirits of dead children rising up to heaven from an earthy grave. It revives a culture of phantasmagoria – the supernatural magic lantern séances that were developed in Europe in the latter part of the 1700s. Images of apparitions and ghosts were projected onto gauze screens using rudimentary projectors, presenting the often-terrified audiences with the spectacle of spirit-beings floating before them.⁴² *Vas pa'l cielo y vas llorando* alludes to the culture of the *velorio del angelito* – the little angel's wake – festive celebrations of infant mortality once practiced by some rural cultures of Central and South America, particularly in the Andes. The small dead child became an object of adoration and their corpses were dressed-up, decorated and put on display before burial. These elaborate and apparently morbid rituals derived from an interpretation of Catholic doctrine in which it was understood that because a baptised baby's soul was pure and uncontaminated by sin, it would automatically go directly to heaven without having to go through purgatory. In the festivities, mortality thus became a process of externalised social inscription separate from both biological death and internalised grief. Although these practices seemed to combine with native beliefs about the supernatural role of the sky, anthropologist Roger Bastide has argued that the central idea has a purely European explanation. A dead child commonly represents a future betrayed or denied. Yet confronted with the very high child mortality that missionary colonial contact brought to the Americas, ‘the clergy thought up a new ideology according to which all little children who died became angels in heaven; thus one should not weep for them, but rejoice.’⁴³

San Guinefort, Annabel Lee, La caja and *Vas pa'l cielo y vas llorando* each share a darkly atmospheric and critical mode in speaking of an electrified Gothic, hauntological

40 This work has been adapted for the exhibition *No temeré mal alguno* in Barcelona and is presented without the cardboard box. The description in this text reflects the original form of the work.

41 *Ante América*, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Bogotá, 27 October – 20 December 1992. Curated by Gerardo Mosquera, Rachel Weiss and Carolina Ponce de León. Toured to Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas; Queens Museum, New York; Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Spencer Museum, University of Kansas, Lawrence; Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José, 1993–94.

42 In a bizarre episode of art criticism, a reviewer of Hernández-Díez's 2003 exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, unwittingly spirited-up an entirely appropriate reading of *Vas pa'l cielo...* and haunted media, despite the fact that the writer was unaware that the video projector was malfunctioning: ‘In a darkened room, a video is projected onto a wall at the base of which is a pile of dirt. The video image, which bends down onto the dirt, consists of sliding purple, green, and blue lines, and the blurry, hovering logos “Pioneer” and “DVD Video”. The dirt is the diminutive representative of the land, and of grave dirt as well; and the blank image suggest that the impact of communications technologies is largely self-referential – empty signifiers, advertisements for themselves.’ Daniel Baird, ‘José Antonio Hernández-Díez’, *Brooklyn Rail*, 1 August 2003.

43 Quoted in Jean Muteba Rahier, *Blackness in the Andes: Ethnographic Vignettes of Cultural Politics in the Time of Multiculturalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 19.

communication and the exceptional status held by the very young. Conceived for *San Guinefort y otras devociones* but never since exhibited, *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* took this to a portentous new dimension within the notion of New Christian Iconography. Whereas previous monitor or projected-image works are quite modest in scale and suggest a form of individual devotion, *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* converges on an imposingly large screen more suggestive of a large congregation or cinema audience. Most uncannily, any traces of evanescent bodies have completely vanished and we are left with a pure electronic presence. The work centres on a surrogate screen – a large red monochromatic lightbox. In front of this giant interface stands a tripod with a series of flashes in the form of a crucifix mounted high up. Synchronised with the cross through an electronic system of sensors and a sampler, the work periodically produces a burst of illumination accompanied by an ominous howling sound, which is also triggered by flash photography. Like a portal to another dimension, the work conjures a paranormal voltaic presence, as if a hybrid between a possessed television set and a flickering cinema screen. It suggests a host of cryptic allusions, from a demonic version of the blinding light and disembodied voice described in the biblical story of the conversion of Saint Paul to Christianity on the road to Damascus, to the haunted television set as a portal to the spirit world in the supernatural horror film *Poltergeist* (1988). Presenting a kind of closed-circuit interactive exorcism scenario, the redemptive symbolism of the crucifix is pitted against a malevolent presence, the giant screen as a satanic double of televangelism. *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* seems to capture all of our contemporary anxieties about staring into screens, and the idea, as old as the medium itself, that television is bad for you. Significantly, Carol-Anne, the protagonist in *Poltergeist* – who has an unnerving fascination with the television set, especially when it shows no images, and ends up being sucked through it into ‘the Other Side’ –, is a five-year old child. As Murray Leeder has evocatively described, ‘we witness here the collapse of meaning, as we see the medium of television shorn of the necessity of representing anything... We like to feel that we watch television to watch something; Carol-Anne is deliberately looking at the fascinating, awesome spectacle of nothingness.’⁴⁴ *Poltergeist* and *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* arrived at a cultural moment of peak anxiety over the cinema’s bodily effects on its viewers. Moreover, the ambiguous convergence of TV and movies heralded by the home videotape boom marked a shift in usage. Movies, and all their attendant fantasies and potentially unregulated moral threats, could be played in the private sphere of the home.⁴⁵

Like *Sagrado corazón activo*, *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* has been reconstructed for the present exhibition. Likewise *Annabel Lee* and *Houdini*, already floating between the living and the dead, have been brought back to life, their video ghosts given new physicality. Why do the dead return? The answer offered by cinema is no different to that offered by psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek points out.⁴⁶ We could equally extend the proposition to art

44 Murray Leeder, ‘The Fall of the House of Meaning: Between Static and Slime in *Poltergeist*’, *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, no. 5, December 2008.

45 Witness the ‘Video Nasty’ media frenzy in the UK in the early 1980s that led to the imposition of state video censorship in 1984. See for example Julian Petley, ‘“Are We Insane?” The “Video Nasty” Moral Panic’, *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques*. <http://rsa.revues.org/839>

46 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991, p. 23. In the aforementioned *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce makes a similar point. As described in a review: ‘Sconce also develops the potentially contentious idea that certain varieties of postmodern theory are little more than specialized (and ‘jargonized’) incarnations of popular fictions. Thus, sophisticated ruminations by the likes of Sadie Plant, Donna Haraway, or Arthur Kroker can be seen as re-articulating fantasies that have long been in the public arena. The various tales of the ‘50s and ‘60s, for example, demonstrate that popular culture was equally engaged with the questions of contemporary electronic media that occupied the postmodern criticism

practice and curating, and with *Annabel Lee* it is already obvious: the dead return because they were not buried properly. There was a disturbance in the symbolic rites and the living dead return to settle symbolic accounts – there are new meanings to be revealed, new provenances yet to be written.

Besides ‘disinterring’ historical narrative with its selection of Hernández-Díez past works, *No temeré mal alguno* presents a new project by the artist as a conceptual echo. This new series comprises an iconographic study of lightbulb filaments, not only as an addendum to his earlier works’ consideration of electrical revelation and visibility, but, it would seem, as a provocation to consider what is at stake in the sovereign metaphors of light itself. Recalling magic lantern slides or devotional icons, the new work *Filamentos* (Filaments), 2016, comprises copper panels etched with diagrammatic compositions based on different geometrical designs of incandescent lamp filaments – the glowing coils at the heart of the electric light bulb. These emblems recall electricity pylons or occultist symbols. Hernández-Díez casts the invention of electric light as a super-symbol of modern science and civilising experience – in short, of the Enlightenment itself, as well as its colonial repercussions in the Americas. Metaphors of darkness versus light – as charged energy, lucid illumination or inspiration, for example – become mixed with those of technological reason and religious faith.

Accounts of the reception of electric light by the church at the end of the nineteenth century provide a telling account of spiritual authenticity and modern comforts. The various religious denominations handled electrification quite differently.⁴⁷ Evangelical churches opted for stronger brighter lights that suggested practicality and inclusiveness, while churches based around ritual and liturgy preferred a spare and symbolic use of light that aped candlelight and preserved a sense of the mystic potential of gloom. In 1885 the Vatican denounced electrical light as theologically suspect and overly theatrical and ecclesiastical authorities banned its use for sacred celebrations (although the Vatican was finally electrified in 1892).⁴⁸ Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian philosopher of media theory, described the light bulb as a perfect model for his celebrated concept that ‘the medium is the message’. In the highly mediated world of the ‘information society’, an analysis of content misses the point, he argued: the medium itself has the power to enable communications, behaviours and social effects.⁴⁹ A Catholic convert, McLuhan stressed the theological overtones of the function of electricity, almost equating it to an all-pervasive deity whose essence is its existence.

What happened to the image of Saint Roch with his hound that once barked to scare away thieves in the gloom of the church of the Convent dels Àngels? Where is the dog statue that once stood outside the church to commemorate this event? Joan Amades gives no obvious indications in *Stories and Legends of Barcelona*. Yet he does recall a further canine custom that had apparently taken root: a curious test of Barcelona citizens’ knowledge of the city. The challenge was to walk, blindfolded and without speaking to anyone, from the stone dog at the doors of the church of the Convent dels Àngels through the old town to the church of Santa Maria del Mar, more than one kilometre away. A still more bizarre and hauntological legend remains to be kindled. The stone dog of the Convent dels Àngels has now come back, from wherever it has been, and appears in the form of Hernández-Díez’s *San Guinefort*.

of the ’70s and ’80s.’ Andreas Kitzmann, ‘They’re Here, They’re Everywhere. A review of Jeffrey Sconce, “Haunted Media”...’ *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2002.

47 Ernest Freeberg, *The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America*. Penguin, 2013.

48 Carol Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 161.

49 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964]. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994, p. 8.

The legend of Saint Roch tells that he retreated into a forest having contracted the plague while caring for the sick; his life was saved by a dog that brought him food. Roch later died in prison and his dog ended up with a noble family – Roch’s faithful hound was none other than the future Saint Guinefort.⁵⁰ The dead return because they were not buried properly.

⁵⁰ The Saint Roch–Saint Guinefort connection is deduced for example by Edward Muir in *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 25, and by Allan Tulchin in *That Men Would Praise the Lord: The Triumph of Protestantism in Nîmes, 1530–1570*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. xv.