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Like a Dance of Starlings

MACBA Collection **Thirty Years and Infinite Ways of Being**

MAC BA TRENTA

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They fly in groups. Hundreds of thousands of birds moving together across the winter sky. Precisely choreographed, they expand and contract, glide and swoop, forming vast pulsing swarms: “the dance of the starlings”. Few birds can perform such a perfectly synchronised aerial ballet.

Echoing how a flock of starlings’ coordinated movements can conjure up a billowing cloud of ever-shifting images—a display known as a *murmuration*—the works in the MACBA Collection also readjust and regroup with each new presentation, animating one another and forming new maps of meaning. The idea of a murmur also suggests a hum of voices, a gathering of intertwined lives collectively asserting their own individual existence.

It is with these aerial dances in mind that we have devised this formulation of the MACBA Collection, in celebration of the museum’s thirtieth anniversary while also reflecting on processes of contemporary subjectification. Eschewing a chronological narrative, the exhibition is structured around five connective nodes that explore notions of subjectivity as malleable entities constructed not in isolation but in dialogue with the shared experiences, social struggles and contexts that run through them. These intertwined and constantly shifting existences of the works in the MACBA Collection generate flexible, dynamic universes.

Like a Dance of Starlings: MACBA Collection — Thirty Years and Infinite Ways of Being follows the emergence of porous beings that can unfurl their subjectivity as a liberating space open to new ways of being in the world.

Antonio Beneyto, *Nina Hagen*, 1982. MACBA Collection. Government of Catalonia long-term loan. National Collection of Art. Formerly Salvador Riera Collection. © Antonio Beneyto. Photo: FotoGasull.

Inhabiting Borders

Where do I end and something else begins? What does it mean to be in the here and now? Many artists have used art as a privileged space to explore their own existence, challenging the notion of the canonical modern subject.

From the insistent questioning by Tony Oursler's *Flamenco Figure* (1994) to the in-depth interviews with male sex workers in the Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona conducted by Dias & Riedweg in *Voracidad Máxima* (2003), the works in this section tackle human subjectivity as a porous notion, crisscrossed by the sum of all our individual experiences. The interplay of different variables in life such as gender, body, race, social class and systems of knowledge gives rise to a plurality of coexisting selves, each with their own agency—"We each contain many more selves than we think", as the French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour might say.

Ocaña reaffirms queer existence through performance and disguise; Jean-Michel Basquiat reflects on his African-American origins in his 1986 self-portrait; Luis Claramunt portrays an anonymous somebody, most likely from Barcelona's Barrio Chino; and Josep Uclés draws us into the world of homoeroticism and the night. The multiple possibilities opened up by these visions of subjectivity embrace a range of liminal existences that inhabit a space beyond the "norm" that have long been silenced and oppressed by hegemonic narratives. As what Chicana poet and activist Gloria Anzaldúa has called "borderland" or "mestiza" subjectivities, they highlight the fragmentary and transformative nature of contemporary experience, grounded in difference and indeterminacy, and stand as alternatives for being and inhabiting the world in a radically free way.

Existing Through the Flesh
Little by little, the boundaries of the rationalising dichotomy that historically sought to separate body and mind have become increasingly blurred. Far from being understood as an exclusively thinking entity, the self today is conceived as an embodied reality, rooted and present. We exist and feel through flesh; it is the body that connects us to the world. For Caribbean writer Rita Indiana, the body cannot be reduced to a symbol or an idea: it unfolds as living flesh, as a site of experience. In Àngels Ribé's *Labyrinthe* (1969 [2025]), bodies articulate a subjectivity that expands inwards and outwards, desiring and relating to what is happening around them.

Thinking about the subject, then, also means rethinking ourselves from our most material dimension, and reclaiming it as a powerful formative tool. As Judith Butler has pointed out, the subject is not something *one is*, but something *one does*. Within this corporeal paradigm, several artistic practices in the Collection reveal the power of the body to leave an imprint of the subject in its many forms and variations. In all of them, it becomes clear that each body inhabits a specific place and context that shape its configuration. Existence becomes a situated practice, in constant transformation, its boundaries merging with its environment.

By understanding how a body helps construct the self, we can also explore ways of thinking about how to empower, protect or repair it, in order to enable an alternative, more pleasurable existence. Hence depictions of all

Àngels Ribé, *Labyrinthe*, 1969 (2025). MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. Long-term loan of the artist. © Àngels Ribé. Photo: Lluís Bover.

types of prosthetic devices, armours and other such artefacts make their way into art, as in Ramon Guillen-Balmes's *"Model d'ús" per a l'Eric* and *"Model d'ús" per a la Laura* (1993), let us expand beyond our corporeal selves, with all their abilities and sensibilities, while celebrating the mutable and performative nature of our being.

Vibrating in Nature
A far cry from the autonomous individual of modernity, subjectivity today is understood as a network of relations, an open body where the biological, the technological, the symbolic and the spiritual converge. Nature is constantly making and remaking itself: rivers reshape their beds, fungi rebuild the soil, and trees communicate underground in an incessant network using a technology still ignored by Western eyes. Claudia Andujar's *Sonhos Yanomami* (2002) shows how certain Indigenous communities see humans as inseparable from the breath of the forest—spirits and ancestors inhabit the mountains, animals and human bodies alike. Every being breathes the same air, and the air itself is considered sacred.

It is impossible to exist separately from the world: we take part in its continuous

flow of creation, in its interspecies ways of being, in the generative mutations between different forms of life. We see this in Miró's sculptures, which evoke a universe of energetic exchange between organisms, or in the transformations suggested by Rosario Zorraquín's *Oruguismo* (2021), in dialogue with Joan Jonas's *Volcano Saga* (1989), where Tilda Swinton embodies a feminine force transformed into a volcano. In a similar vein, Silvia Gubern's sculptures evoke totems as portals to other dimensions, in the same way that Mazatec shaman María Sabina saw sacred mushrooms as a gateway to "see what is hidden" and as a means of communion with the word of the cosmos.

These works suggest subjectivities in communion whose existence expands beyond their visible skin and is conceived as an act of breathing with the surroundings.

Other Ways of Organising the World

Every community, every language and every technology organises the experience of reality by establishing hierarchies between the visible and the invisible, between what counts and what is discarded, between the conscious and the unconscious.

Today, subjectivity is far from being understood as pure self-awareness operating autonomously. We know that the field of consciousness is also the field of the visible, moulded by the dominant visual regimes—the media, screens and discourses that define what deserves to be seen and what must remain hidden. As Marie-José Mondzain has said, we are images of images, bodies shaped by the reflections that surround us. Our mental images do not merely reflect reality; they produce it, distribute it, order it. Through them we learn what to look at, what to fear, what to desire. To order the world is, ultimately, to represent it—and

Claudia Andujar, *Untitled* (from the *Sonhos Yanomami* series), 2002. MACBA. MACBA Collection. MACBA Foundation. Work purchased thanks to Elena Calderón and José Mª Serra. © Claudia Andujar. Photo: Courtesy of Galeria Vermelho.

every representation implies a use of power that sets boundaries. But what happens beyond the domain of this visual economy? Can absence become a place of latency that allows us to see things differently?

Suely Rolnik calls this space *micropolitics*: home to something vibrating, something that has not yet taken form but is already stirring, where the subject overwhelms its own representation. The unconscious—understood as an energy of the present, an underground current sustaining the desire for transformation—becomes a laboratory of new forms of existence. In *M.I.T Project* (1990–2009), Matt Mullican reflects on this way of organising the world through an extended meditation on the self; likewise, in their own fashion, A. R. Penck and Zush both confront us with the vulnerability of a being lost in a vast immensity, seeking the meaning of existence. From this perspective, subjectivity is not about destroying order, but transforming it through vibration, through spaces where the conscious and the unconscious meet. It means dismantling the rigid structures the West has used to order experience—reason over body, consciousness over instinct, the subject over the world.

Joan Ponç, *Suite Al·lucinacions II*, 1947. MACBA Collection. Government of Catalonia long-term loan. National Collection of Art. Formerly Salvador Riera Collection.

Leaving the Furrow

The etymology of the word delirium, from the Latin *delirare* ("to leave the furrow" or "to stray from the marked path") has an agricultural origin, describing the movement of a plough veering away from a straight line across the earth. Over time, this material sense became a metaphor for something deviating from the path of reason, crossing the boundaries of established mental order. Yet, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, delirious thought is not an anomaly but a fertile, transversal phenomenon—a form of intelligence which, in leaving the furrow, reveals other possible ways of understanding and producing reality.

It was modernity that stripped delirium of its status as a legitimate narrative and banished it as a forbidden and marginal discourse of what can be said about ideas such as desire, the body, death or power. This becomes evident in works by Joan Ponç, in a Tàpies associated with the experimental phase of Dau al Set, and in the festive, ritual actions of *Cérémonials* performed by the "Parisian Catalans" (Antoni Miralda, Joan Rabascall and Jaume Xifra) together with Dorothée Selz at

different sites around Paris and the area around Cologne, filmed by Benet Rossell. Delirium does not flee from the world; it breaks through and reimagines the limits of what the system deems to be thinkable. It may be linked to the visionary or mediumistic experience found in the works of Josefa Tolrà, where the figure of the medium acts not as a representative but as a conduit for channelling currents through her body, thus becoming a surface of passage, a kind of device connecting different planes of consciousness, and between the human and nonhuman.

Delirium, then, appears in the works in this section not as an unproductive deviation but as an enriching force powering a journey of learning, inwards and outwards—as in William Kentridge's voyage in *Ulisse: ECHO scan slide bottle* (1998), which takes critical swipes at the rationalism of modern medicine and its institutions while rejecting the notion of a single meaning to create new possible worlds through boundless subjectivities.

MACBA Collection as a Mutable Archive. In Collaboration with the Research and Documentation Centre, the Archive and Radio Web MACBA
The celebration of MACBA's thirtieth anniversary is an apt moment to take stock and look back over how the museum's past has shaped its present, as well as a welcome opportunity to appreciate how it has evolved. This is not only a tribute but also a critical reassessment of the interwoven threads that have fashioned the museum we know today. From the outset, the MACBA Collection has gradually taken shape by embracing the challenges of its contemporaneity and taking the necessary risks to become a platform for bold, politically engaged practices. Year after year, it unfolds like a growing murmuration, a constellation of voices emerging from the past to produce a polyphonic resonance with infinite, boundless and diverse ambitions.

The exhibition, therefore, ends with a range of formats that sketch out the history of the MACBA Collection from its origins thirty years ago, to the present exhibition posters, pamphlets, publications, photographs of exhibitions and their set-up, interviews and a series of FONS ÀUDIO podcasts that weave a first-person narrative of the MACBA Collection through artists and their contexts.

'Out from Reserve'. In Collaboration with MACBA's Education Department
This exhibition is complemented by three delocalised works by Alán Carrasco, Dora García and Tanit Plana, which are presented at the Escola Jaume I and Escola Segarra primary schools and the Institut Escola Mestre Morera secondary school in Barcelona, as part of "Out from Reserve", a programme that integrates contemporary artworks from MACBA's Collection into primary and secondary schools in collaboration with Barcelona City Council.

Exhibition curated by Claudia Segura Campins and Núria Montclús.

If You Would Rather Listen

Dive into the show with our digital audio guide narrated by artists and curators, plus expanded content for a unique visit.

Open Your Eyes

Guided tour
From 29 November 2025
Saturdays at 6 pm

Free activity. To book and find out more, go to **macba.cat**

MACBA Friends
Guided tour led by Claudia Segura Campins and Núria Montclús, curators of the exhibition
Thursday, 22 January 2026, at 6 pm

Infinite Ways of Seeing course-workshop
Monday, 24 November 2025, at 6 pm
Monday, 1 December 2025, at 5.30 pm

Check out our exclusive guided tours for MACBA Friends at **macba.cat**

Opening Hours
Mon., Wed., Thur. and Fri.: 11 am to 7.30 pm (between 25 June and 24 September, 10 am to 8 pm)
Closed Tue. (unless a public holiday)
Sat.: 10 am to 8 pm (free admission between 4 pm and 8 pm)
Sun. and public holidays: 10 am to 3 pm

MACBA Saturdays
Free admission to exhibitions every Saturday from 4 pm

Museum tickets are valid for one month. Activate your ticket at the reception and return as many times as you wish.

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