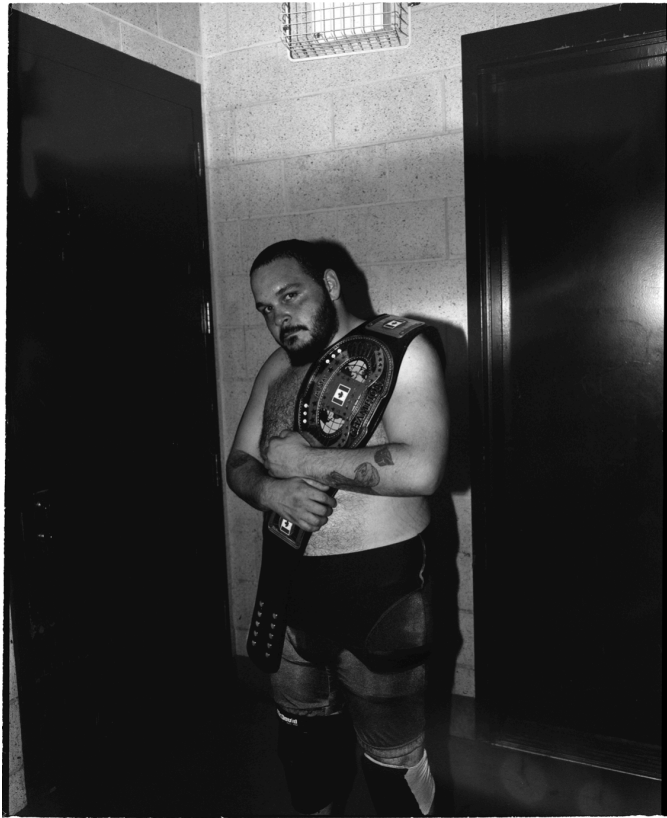


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Elle Pérez Brings Everyone Along

Alex Da Corte
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Elle Pérez, *Tank*, 2013/2025

On an early spring afternoon in Washington Heights, sitting on the steps by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, I listened to a mockingbird sing to me from a nearby tulip poplar. The song of the mockingbird mimicked the community of birds that lived in the area: sparrow, thrush, wren, flicker. How do we remember our lives? In song, in name, in pictures, in words? How do we carry histories with us, like the mockingbird?

I thought of the words of the photographer Elle Pérez as I sat in the shade that hot afternoon: *Dogs in the morning. Clothes on the line. Bronco in the Crowd. And STILL!!!* The words came from poems adhered to the walls throughout their recent solo show, *The World Is Always Again Beginning, History with the Present*. The exhibition gathers twenty years of photographs, words, collages, and video—naming, seeing, finding and celebrating their friends, family, and community, frame by frame.

From Puerto Rico to Rome, from Monet's garden in Giverny to sweaty punk shows at the First Lutheran Church in the Bronx, Elle sings their song, bringing everyone along with them. From our respective homes in New York and Philadelphia, Elle and I discussed the ways they see the world.

Alex Da Corte: There's a performative aspect to your work, and then there's a documentary or diaristic aspect—you're making the work and understanding the world, and understanding culture. It's like being on stage and offstage at the same time. Could you speak a about that space, how you do both or do everything?

Elle Pérez: I feel really lucky for having come to art, and being an artist, not through an institution, but through a group of people I was in direct conversation with.

I must have been twelve or thirteen when I went to a Bronx Underground (BXUG) punk show at the First Lutheran Church (FLC) for the first time. Then I got a camera, joined the collective, and immediately started making photographs of my friends.

The pictures I make have always had the option of being more than just art, and taking on a utility. Back then, I would share them immediately on a hosted website I linked to Myspace. A picture could then be used on someone's profile page, it could be an advertisement for a band, it could be someone's memory of a night. Later, as time passed, people started to pass away and then the photographs became a kind of dynamic memorial of someone. I could go back and find two hundred photographs of someone who had died; here they are on the back steps, here they are making a funny face, here they are with their girlfriend, and here they are at their own funeral. What I've been struck by in putting this show together is the profound amount of trust that endures between myself and everyone else from those days.

Recently, I got back in touch with the younger brother of my friend whose funeral is depicted in that front room at Arts and Letters. I reached out to ask for permission to put the photograph in the show. The picture is from 2009, so I was like, "I don't want to upset you, I don't want to upset your family. But I do feel like this is one of the most important pictures I have ever made, and it would be an honor to put it up." He responded almost instantly like, "Do it. You never have to ask." That's such a profound gift for an artist, I think, that level of trust. Because that picture is not separate from real life, and it's not something that someone feels is separate from the truth of what happened. You know what I mean?

Da Corte: I do know what you mean. You are deeply invested in a community of people and your friends. You're a righteous friend, and you make room for so much. People feel that. So of course, it doesn't surprise me that that trust is apparent in the pictures you make and in the relationships you make. I anticipated that from seeing your work before I ever met you.

It's funny, I was thinking about the Italian word for camera being room, and I was like, Oh, wow, Elle makes rooms for people, or the work is a room, it's a basement of FLC, it's a garden, it's Pedro's backyard, it's the wrestling ring. A room is a thing that holds people, it holds things together. It can make space for people, there's room to have discourse, there's a kind of seat at the table to discuss or argue or be different and be okay with these differences. And I find that that is so much what I see in your work, it's what I think makes it quite humane.

Pérez: I'm glad to hear that for so many different reasons. Some of them are personal and some of them are formal. I'm like, Oh, phew, the work is working.

Da Corte: You're clearly at work. You're always engaged in thinking and absorbing and being present and actively looking. And that takes quite a bit of energy. Because I find that people sort of are lazier viewers of things, maybe less impressed or a little bit numb, this brain rot in a way

of just casually being in the world. And yet it seems as though micro light shows almost invisible moments that are quite special.

I keep thinking back to this photograph of your grandfather's garden and that beautiful dog, and the boat—the Mona Lisa—and thinking, Here is such a rich space of so many things. It's a portrait of your family, it's a portrait of nature, it's a portrait of art history—and how you saw it and frame it—and it's all there for you.

Pérez: That series came out of nowhere, in a way. I had been making pictures in Puerto Rico around my grandfather's impending death that I wasn't putting pressure on. Then, by chance, I was invited to Giverny, which I had never been to before. That is where I encountered Monet's garden, and became interested in Monet as a person.

One of the ideas that surfaced while I was working on this show was the idea of chance. The chance that one gets to be an artist, and the chance that one's art is then understood, and the chance that someone else—a viewer—*feels* the feelings in the work. While contemplating Monet's life and studio in Giverny, I began thinking about the dehumanization and myths that result from fame. Because it's not being an artist that dehumanizes you, it's something else. It's like, to become myth you have to in some ways become less human, and what causes that?

Da Corte: I think it's capitalism.

Pérez: Yes, for sure. Myth feeds the money machine. For instance, Monet's garden. There were tourists pouring in by the busload to see it. I paid eleven euros to go look with everyone else. It felt like all of Europe was there at the same time. Everyone was responding to the garden with their cameras, even if only an iPhone. No one was making the exact same picture. So wild. And yet it was so interesting to me. I was very impressed by this paradigm for seeing and making that he'd set up. The prompt was simple: how could Monet see something new every day? It was so powerful even in its conserved state, as a museum. It was fundamentally different than something like the Frida Kahlo or Luis Barragan house where everyone takes the same photograph.

At that moment, I was also searching for how I could continue to make art. How do you continue to innovate? How do you continue to work against and with yourself, to push yourself, and respond to new ideas while contending with the things that you have to do—work, laundry, kids—in order to make a life?

It was fun to play with answering that question in the accompanying essay for the exhibition: I wrote through the figure of Monet. I wanted to break him out of his myth and think about him like he was a friend. Part of that was referring to him in the essay not as Monet, or even Claude, but as Oscar, because I read that Oscar was what his family called him. I have a cousin named Oscar, who I love. So, it was kind of fun to make this swap, almost as if my cousin Oscar was playing Monet in the movie in my mind. It helped me orient a more personal history, like I was describing a friend. Now, being in my mid-thirties, I've watched my friends go through various cycles of the art world and their various relationships to it. I could find compassion for someone who had really been evacuated of humanity because of that kind of consumption capitalism can provoke, or even demand.

Da Corte: And that's sort of where you have to find and bolster this magic in your own life outside of if you're Claude or an Oscar. It relocates or resituates this idea of "artists," in quotes or a capital A. You're a person in the world and you would be doing this or something else regardless of who was seeing it. That seems so obvious in the photographs in those first rooms of Arts and Letters. That you are just looking, and that the kind of picture you're sharing is not reliant on necessarily the particularities of who we're looking at, there's something there. It makes me wonder, how does that framing happen or that selection happen for you? Is it about a balanced space of finding the formal and finding the—not sentimental, as you've refuted that, but the sparkle or something? I feel like there's a little game there, or maybe that's the itch you have to scratch.

Pérez: I started making art because I wanted people to see it, not because I wanted to do it only for myself. It was always about relationships. The spark of wanting to photograph was also the spark of wanting to look. It was how I wanted to look at other people as much as it was about how other people wanted to see through my eyes. And there were a couple other people who then started photographing as well, it was like, "Cool! what are *you* seeing!?" Style became something to contend with. My pictures became less of "the news" and became more authored. I started responding to my pictures, challenging myself to heighten the feeling of emotion, to make more evocative portraits, and photograph who I wanted to look at.

I kept photographing even when I went to college in Baltimore. I would come back monthly to the Bronx, shoot, and go right back to Baltimore. While I was in Maryland, I was totally doing the art school thing and experimenting wildly. I took that influence home with me. I would go back to the Bronx Underground and experiment with film, or experiment with a new style. I could always try something new there, because I felt no anxiety about losing access to the space, or not having people's trust. I felt it not as a subject to make art about, but as my life.

There's this little arc in my archive, I think it's around 2009 or 2010. I must've gotten really into the Düsseldorf School of Photography, because everyone is in this side profile, high flash, like all German indexical. Zoomed in, tight crop. It's somewhere in between Dijkstra and Tillmans.

Da Corte: All those folks.

Pérez: Yeah, all those folks. It's a very Becher-esque punk index of my friends. Like punk water towers or something. Finally somebody was like, "You need to back up!" I was like, "You're right, you're right." *[laughs]*

That last year of BXUG coincided with my last year of graduate school. I felt like all of my education ended at the same moment. FLC ended in February 2015, and I graduated from Yale that May. It felt like I lost access to both of these places for experimentation at the same time. While I was in Puerto Rico last year, I realized my grandfather's garden was another one of my artistic laboratories.

I was going to Puerto Rico because my grandfather was dying; my life was occurring and I was responding to it. I started photographing in his garden around 2012. And as I grew up, like the others, this laboratory was coming to a natural conclusion. A very human conclusion, in that my grandfather was passing away. I knew that the space would change. I was like, Okay, I know this change is coming and I'm going to respond to it. I don't know exactly when it's going to happen, but I know it's going to happen. For about a year, I was making photographs around his

home and garden, unpressured and unassigned, made in premeditated grief. It was when I went to Monet's garden that the threads came together.

The scholar Horace Ballard had been the one to suggest that I photograph Monet's garden. I was like, "You know what? I think you're right about that." I had no idea what I'd do. I looked at what others had done a little bit, but I didn't want to look too much, and I figured I would simply respond to the site. I thought like, okay, I'm going to apply all of the things that I learned photographing my grandfather's backyard in Puerto Rico to this new place.

One of those revelations was about responding to what was there. Observing, accepting, and taking on the pictorial challenges presented, even if it was something like undesirable light at high noon. I realized all the flexibility that "undesirable" light gave me in terms of how much I could work with the tools of the camera to create that space or to compress it. I was wrangling pictures, not predetermining them. That made anything a photograph. Every single thing I looked at was like, "I'm a picture! Over here! I'm a picture too!"

I was actually quite overwhelmed. My grandmother and my aunt were sitting on the porch, watching me. They were smoking their cigarettes and they were laughing like, "*What* are you doing?" Because I'm photographing the dog's bowl with the garden hose and the random trash that's in the yard, and I was like, "It is all so beautiful!" And they're like, "Okay, you have lost your damn mind." *[laughs]*

Da Corte: But it must be wonderful—

Pérez: And yeah, they just let me do my thing.

Da Corte: Well, it must be wonderful to then find that sort of illumination that might be in a water lily, in a dog's bowl. And to fold yourself back into these histories that maybe seem so far away, but they're also your life. It makes me think of your last show at 47 Canal and the work you were doing in Rome when we were there, and now this latest collage work and how that then almost becomes its own sort of analysis or diagram of a book in open form—of your life, or a life that can be read and understood and is quite active. It's a real living thing, whatever that may be. It doesn't necessarily have to be beholden to you, but it is definitely an active way of looking. And I wonder if you could speak a little bit to how you arrived at this sort of open plan, this kind of brilliant mind schema.

Pérez: I've always made those collages for myself in the studio. A lot of people do, I don't really think that they're a unique structure to me. They started to feel like they were important to show alongside the pictures. They serve an interpretive purpose for people that can extend beyond the wall label or the text and provide a different mode of interpretation for the work, one that is open-ended. The collages allow people to re-experience putting the show together. When you look at the collage you aren't looking at something that has formed a conclusion. You are looking at the process.

And you might have a different conclusion than I did! And in that, people can maybe see how I put things together. It creates a point of contrast between what I have selected as the work on the wall, and what other photographs also exist. That creates an opportunity for people to get to know both the work and me better. I love seeing people looking at it. This one I kind of designed to be playful, this one has—

Da Corte: It has a small disco ball in it.

Pérez: Which is very appropriate, I feel like, for anyone who knows me personally.

You referred to this collage like a form of Facebook, and that resonates with me. Viewers have a very parasocial relationship to photography now. The subject, once presumed silent, is now expected to speak on their experience regularly. And people will often feel they are entitled to a response. It has been this way now for a while. I mean, even at the 2019 Whitney Biennial opening, someone sought out Aurora Mattia after seeing her in the photograph *Mae (Three days after)* (2019), interrupted her conversation, and without even introducing themselves was like, “What happened to you?”

At first, that assumed right to access was a shock to me. After a while I started to ask, how do I subvert this? Knowing that people had a tendency to see someone, take a picture of them, and send it to that person, I devised this collage almost as a postcard machine that generates notes for my friends from people who they might otherwise not necessarily hear from. So, it became a little game of love, of being this person that sent you a picture of you as a way to be like, “I see you! I’m thinking about you.” It is also from me, but it’s a different type of reaching for someone than what happens on Instagram. It is using the work to create intimate experiences.

In my studio practice, the collages help me think new ideas. There it’s a completely fluid possibility. Parts go up and go down, photographs move around, more things come in, articles are Xeroxed, things are different sizes. Seeing what works, what did I not expect, all helps me see how can I get a little further along in my thinking. How can my pictures work in a way that I didn’t see before? And through that, I can understand my work better, and see where I can make them more complex, and make the pictures deeper in both form and content.

Da Corte: You give them new life.

Pérez: Yes.

Da Corte: Yes, you give them new life. You extend the frame, like we were talking about earlier, the space in the photograph is the stage. And then there’s this outside kind of bubbling, living, strange, and unpredictable thing that is unfixed. And this method seems to be able to bridge that gap, your generosity to give more and extend the thing that you’re seeing, and the photograph then is found in these other spaces. It feels more like the way we understand images now, too, and pictures, because they’re active and they’re talking. And there’s all of this kind of effervescence there that wasn’t before, in an open paper picture of the past.

Pérez: How these came about as being considered pieces at all is a funny story. In 2018, while working on my solo exhibition *Diablo*, at MoMA PS1, Klaus Biesenbach had asked me, “All right, so you do these very tight hangs—but what does your studio look like?” And this was the honest answer to that question.

So, I thought I was just temporarily showcasing stuff from my studio. I naively thought I was going to get it all back at the end of the show. And then 47 Canal sold it. They were like, “Congrats! That large piece sold to the ICA Miami.” And I was like, “What piece?” And they were like, “The collage piece.” And I was like, “What collage?” *[laughs]* My first reaction to the gallery

telling me that they sold it was “that was my stuff! I needed that!” And then my second reaction was like, “okay, but I need the money.” I’d done the exchange of a piece that feels like part of you for money before. But it did freak me out a little bit. I waited five years before doing anything like that again in public.

I didn’t stop making those wall pieces during that time. They evolved into those sketchbook binders that I make—that’s their collapsed form. The collages travel collapsed, and then they expand, they collapse and expand again. Now, I think of them as how ideas leave the studio. It leaves in a state where it’s crystallized as a thought. It’s frozen almost like in an active state. I guess they’re a little photographic too, as in that is the view of standing in front of the studio wall and trying to figure it out. They do something kind of cool where people don’t necessarily see them as art. Which isn’t to say that they don’t have respect for them, but rather they don’t see them as untouchable. Recently, I had someone ask to be removed off of one, and before I could do it, someone else took the photograph off the piece.

Da Corte: Whoa.

Pérez: I know. I was like, “Wait, you did what?” And we looked at each other, and they realized in that moment what they had done. I was like, “It’s okay. I like what you did.” I liked their move. It was unconsciously assertive. It was good. But it shows exactly how alive those works are, like they’re still warm when they’re on the wall.

Da Corte: That’s history with the present.

Pérez: Right there.

Da Corte: In the exhibition you wrote a series of small poems or statements, truisms that appear on the walls of the galleries at Arts and Letters. I was so taken by these lines you finish your show with: “I make gifts out of loss, and these gifts have been a long time coming. My audience is my subject, they are at the same, love with photography.”

Pérez: This show is so much about audience as a photographic subject. I’ve been thinking about audience for a long time—not as a mysterious judging force, but as people who are active participants in the creation and life of a photograph. For me, part of the pleasure of making the work is the audience.

The “audiences” shrink as you go through the show. In the first room, that audience that makes up that work is about five hundred people. For the wrestling shows, about two hundred. The audience for Monet’s garden is in the thousands, but the audience for my grandfather’s garden is our family. And then, when you go into the video room with the film with my father, *teen movie (la distancia)* (1965/2025), the audience is one person: in that film, I become the audience. The video was made in our living room: he’s looking at 8mm films he made when he was fifteen, I asked him to explain them to me, to tell me what came to his mind. He knew it was for the show, he knew exactly where it was going to be, he knew it was going to be in a video room in Washington Heights.

I was sitting on the couch where I always sit, he’s sitting in his chair where he always sits. I cast the home videos to the TV. I realized after we did it once, that if I put it on loop, he’d keep talking. And then I asked him to do it in Spanish. I wanted it to be a bilingual film that mirrored

my experience of Spanish. His Spanish says so much about his, and our, own personal history and also offers a broader cultural history about our ethnic community in the city.

I had wanted to put all of that into a work. And the most formally economic way to do it was to let him speak over something that he'd made, and to reflect on it after almost fifty years. The film allows other people to have the experience that I love about my father. I love listening to him. So, I'm going to let you listen to my father through me. I am present in the piece, as both author and audience.