

The Knowledge of Motion: 2023 VCS Alumni Award Recipient Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa
by Alexander Antai Hwang, VCS Class of 2023

As bodily beings, we are in motion. We constantly orient and reorient ourselves as the world around us changes. Scholars like Dr. Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa are keenly aware of this continuous process and are part of a movement in pedagogy that asks what the energies people move within them might teach them.

Otálvaro-Hormillosa, a member of the California College of the Arts (CCA) Visual and Critical Studies (VCS) class of 2012, is an educator, an interdisciplinary performance artist-scholar, a writer, and a psychogeographer. Inspired by her engagement with women of color and Latina/x feminisms, queers of color critique, eroticism, performance, and mindfulness-based art practices, the VCS class of 2023 awarded her the 2023 Visual and Critical Studies Alumni Award. After completing her MA at CCA, Otálvaro-Hormillosa went on to receive a PhD in Theater and Performance Studies with a minor in Art History from Stanford University, where she was also awarded the Graduate Feminist Scholar Award and the first-ever Carl Weber Prize for Integration of Creative Practice and Scholarly Research. She holds a BA from Brown University in the independent concentration Hybridity and Performance.

Over the past several years, so many people's experiences have become disembodied. Perhaps more than anything else, the move to online teaching and communication enunciated this shift for many into the digital and disembodied. Talking through the blue screens of laptops and phones, students and educators became floating heads and moving pixels. And so with the COVID-19 pandemic came also a pandemic of mental health conditions like anxiety and

depression. Yet educators and scholars like Otálvaro-Hormillosa are reorienting pedagogical practices and ways of knowing toward the body. As a professor at Stanford, she heads the LifeWorks program, which helps students integrate their scholarship, creative expression, and contemplative practices to align their academic work with their personal values and aspirations. In her presentation upon receiving the VCS Alumni Award, she explained how the three pillars of the LifeWorks program create the KBC (Knowing, Being, and Creating). She ultimately wants to generate ways of teaching and learning that allow students to use embodied practices to reach an increased state of mindfulness. In her class *Kinesthetic Delight: Movement and Meditation*, held at Stanford during spring 2023, students developed their own group “movement-meditation scores” to expand their understanding of terms like *meditation* and *mindfulness* that have been reduced to static bodily practices in the popular imagination.¹ Through integrating meditation and mindfulness with kinesthetic movement, Otálvaro-Hormillosa works to do away with the mind-body binary. Knowledge is not something achieved just from sitting at a desk combing through texts or poring over objects in a library or archive. It is something that one also forms and creates through movement and motion.

Otálvaro-Hormillosa’s practice teaches people the importance of centering their bodies so that they can fully experience and learn from the world around them. She holds a teaching certificate in Laughter Yoga and is currently working toward a certification in Qigong, a Chinese medicinal practice of bodily movement and breathing. In practicing these alternative body-centered approaches to experiencing the world, Otálvaro-Hormillosa is reconceptualizing ways people can know themselves and their bodies to help them break out from the disembodied,

¹ Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa, “Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa Ph.D.,” Gigi Otálvaro, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.gigiotalvaro.org/teaching-speaking-engagements/>.

disinterested gaze imposed by technology. She is developing practices with the goal of helping others rediscover the awe and wonder of the world.

Otálvaro-Hormillosa is particularly interested in the effects of the tech industry that has come to dominate San Francisco and the greater Bay Area landscape. For her book project *Erotic Resistance: The Struggle for the Soul of San Francisco* (University of California Press, 2024), Otálvaro-Hormillosa is engaging with a variety of research practices that focus on embodied knowledge. For example, to get a better understanding of San Francisco's human geography, Otálvaro-Hormillosa practiced psychogeography, a performative practice of walking and studying space associated with the Situationist International movement. Additionally, Otálvaro-Hormillosa is engaging with archival materials and historiography, or rather *herstoriography*, such as oral histories. She is conducting interviews with a group of women spanning three generations who performed in San Francisco's strip clubs from the 1960s until the 2010s. Her intention is to reframe their performances as feminist performance—a move to “resignify stripper bodies, thus mitigating the stigma attached to them.” In [an essay](#) published in *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, she writes that recording this community's stories, “which are imperiled by San Francisco's incessant gentrification,” is vital to sustaining their legacies and accounting for the “multiplicity of their identities.” She sees her project as “urban memory preservation,” an effort to combat cultural amnesia in San Francisco, where gentrification and technocracies continue to drastically change the urban and cultural landscape.

The phenomenon of technology and the forces of capitalism changing landscapes and the ways people interact with the land is not new. And although certain sites of performance, gathering, organizing, and activism have been drastically changed or even forgotten over the years, Otálvaro-Hormillosa's teaching and scholarship offer alternative ways of remembering

what came before us and strategies to move forward with each other. You can rename a place and put up a new building, but you can never change what happened there. Perhaps if we can find ways to move with each other and with those from the past, we can feel their traces and learn from the embodied knowledge that came before us.