

Susannah Bielak

**Artist Statement: *Quake/Temblor*
(2008 – present)**

Two years ago while searching through family photographs, I found slides of the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. These photographs, taken by my father, a professor of civil engineering returning to his native city, show architectural disfigurements. The technicolor Hotel del Carlo expelled guts where two floors had collapsed. Buildings sank, streets cracked down the middle, and columns flowed out of buildings like water. These pictures, showing no human presence, were side-by-side with casual snapshots and family portraits. The juxtaposition was destabilizing, pushing me to question the issue of terra firma in daily life.

In response to this encounter, I generated *Quake/Temblor*, a multimedia project working between the ethnographic and the allegorical. The project joins spaces of scientific testing, public memory, and private history—making reference to the Richter Scale, the broken city, and the kitchen table. *Quake/Temblor* aims to make visible some of what lies between everyday family life and the experience of an earthquake. The project functions stratigraphically.

The project includes video, photographic prints, engraved kitchen tables, prints pulled from these tables, and surround sound. The project interweaves historic documents, performative reenactments, material translations, and conceptual experimentation in order to engage a reflexive, fragmentary archive of a disaster.

The videos were staged at UCSD's Caltrans Seismic Response Modification Device (SRMD) Test Facility, one of the world's most powerful seismic shake tables. They call up questions of premonition, ungrounding, and the relationship of the individual to a larger social system. To create these videos, I applied the same pressure and motion normally used to test the integrity of structural systems (e.g. bridge bearings, scaled buildings) to domestic objects and situations. Working with a loose script, I staged a happening on the shake table during which people repeatedly reenacted life before, during, and after a quake. Working with structural engineers, the next day we applied a seismic record from the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, magnitude 8.1 on the Richter scale, to a living room/dining room set. In the resulting videos, people and domestic objects inhabit a massive, brute, mechanical system—leaving the quotidian disturbed and displaced.

The kitchen table, representing domestic stability, takes on a primary role in *Quake/Temblor*, substituting for the body in a space of scientific testing, and serving as both a canvas and printing block in two-dimensional work. Through its transposition, multiplication, and deconstruction, my intent is to trouble this centerpiece of lived reality.

Engraving into Formica, a material patterned to emulate natural forms, speaks to an unsustainable built environment. Formica, with its durable, domestic nature and supposed indestructibility, reveals itself as thin laminate, addressing the precarious relationship between people and nature and the illusions with which we sometimes surround ourselves.

Sound plays a vital role in the project—not only amplifying the video, but animating still prints, engravings, and historic photographs—punctuating past and present, lived and imagined spaces.