

What we call collective forgetfulness happens when certain groups of humans are unable—either voluntarily or passively, through rejection, indifference or laziness, or because of some historical catastrophe that interrupted the course of their days and their affairs—to transmit for posterity what they learned from the past.<sup>1</sup>

Yosef Hayan Yerushalmi

From time immemorial, art, even before it was called art, has contributed to safekeeping the history of humanity and to constructing a collective memory based on an exploration of the complex universe of the invention of images; it has done so either intentionally or unconsciously, but invariably linked to a factual speculation of symbolization. In the ample framework of contemporary art, this speculation implies a scrutiny and a theory of not only beauty, of the problems inherent in representation and the cognitive processes, but also of art's place in the social context. The artist and theoretician have never stopped wondering about art's instrumental value, as proven by the numerous debates and countless artistic constructions recorded throughout history combining the esthetic object with tremendously tragic events occurring during the evolution of man's existence.

A number of disciplines have examined art and attempted to explain the socio-cultural imagery interlaced in symbolic practices. Art history, sociology, anthropology, psychology and linguistics, to name just a few, offer partial and complementary approaches

that assist us in the difficult task of unraveling the esthetic discourse and experience; but none of them alone can grasp it all. Such is the complexity and vastness of this particular form of making and bringing to fruition; of creating and apprehending meaning; of knowledge, that it triggers both intellectual and emotional speculation. This distressing yet pleasant sensation of being on the verge of laying bare some reasoning or of understanding the hidden essence which escapes us just when we think we've got it; that refractory quality of truth; that instant in which knowledge is uncovered and reconciled with its impossibility, may be what inspires humans to continue recording their personal experiences in the form of esthetic symbolizations that transcend humanity.

Perhaps it is in this sense of proximity to a less provisional reality than the one we live with daily, to an explanation of the inexplicable, that art's engine lies, redefining itself constantly, and the artist's engine, that shakes and debates over time to fuse its poetic vocation with the ethical demands imposed on the artist by an awareness of one's responsibility as a socio-cultural negotiator.

This dialogue, which under cover of 20th century utopias enjoyed a critical-political profile with moral implications, underwent a crisis as the great historical narratives began to founder. Which accounts for why the current reconfiguration of the links between art and the different social fronts has retracted above all inside these very strategies of representation, and why at the beginning of the 21st century the reasons for pondering ethical matters seem less clear. Rhetorical abuse, on the other hand, has also contributed to a certain erosion of meaning, abetting the crisis of ethical paradigms and making it more difficult for art to resignify its political function.

Nevertheless, the extreme circumstances affecting the political, socio-cultural and economic spheres of many sectors of the world population—displacement, war, innumerable diasporas: an inevitable context in which art is created—, frequently wind up conquering terrain usurped by skepticism and cynicism, demanding a language with which to name the unnamable, symbolize it, exorcise it, confess it, turn it into collective memory.

<sup>1</sup> Yosef Hayan Yerushalmi, *Reflexiones sobre el olvido (Thoughts on Forgetfulness)*, at [www.cholonautas.edu.pe / Virtual Social Sciences Library](http://www.cholonautas.edu.pe/Virtual%20Social%20Sciences%20Library), p. 6.

This demand—which is also a clamor for critical pronouncement— puts pressure on the artist to seek new signifying strategies that will once again infuse the creative act with reason and problematize our perception of reality. It is this tragic and immediate reality which urges many to continue exploring ways of questioning their surroundings, venturing into new poetic and cognitive processes, expanding and redefining artistic instruments and esthetic actions.

The war in Colombia—the subject of this exhibit—is one of the dramatic realities to have fueled, and that continues to fuel, a variety of artistic manifestations aimed at intervention with reality, creating memory and meaning, posing questions, and stimulating debate.

The show entitled *Arte y Violencia desde 1948* exhibited at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá in 1999 was eloquent in this regard<sup>2</sup>. It showed how over a period of more than fifty years, Colombian artists have constantly reconsidered the methods used to materialize a kind of visual equivalent of the tragedy itself, capable of positioning the viewer in the other's place, making the intransmissible—the experience of horror— into something transferable.

The exhibit presented here today is the result of one of these searches to articulate a visual manifestation capable of producing this transference of the pain that has permeated Colombia since the end of the 1940s,

when the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán brought about both the popular uprising known as the Bogotazo, and, following its repression, the denouement of the *Violencia*<sup>3</sup>, a precursor, distant in time but similar in its cruelty, of the present war.

For over ten years, Juan Manuel Echavarría has worked to construct a poetical-critical discourse to support the efforts to free Colombian society from its paralysis in the face of its compatriots' suffering and has developed numerous projects whose visual syntax is based primarily on the use of metaphors. But in his efforts to reformulate more efficient discursive strategies, Echavarría felt the need to substitute mediation of metaphoric figures with a more direct approach to reality. This led him to set up painting workshops in which protagonists of the Colombian war painted images of their own participation in the violence. This time it is not the direct victims, or their interpreters, but those who perpetrated the violent acts who testify as to what is happening in Colombia. Former combatants, paramilitaries, soldiers wounded in battle, guerrillas, all from the lower ranks, paint their stories, those of their commanders, their enemies and their own victims.

The artist's work is therefore an offer to exchange roles in the artistic process, to transfer tools that will lead to the birth of autobiographical pictorial discourses. These visual discourses speak to us of the reality of battles,

massacres, punishments, violations, the suffering of the innocent, the peasants' tragedies, the role of drug trafficking, fear, cruelty and the macabre nature of vengeance; they tell of deviant rituals of violence in which the body becomes, as José Alejandro Restrepo puts it, "The grammatical space of the visible and the legible. . . [the place of] expulsion and excretion of meaning,"<sup>4</sup> they speak of ignorance and social injustice, institutional abandon and loss of State sovereignty. At the same time, the images record the subjectivity of these actors of war and of the subconscious information that impregnates the manipulation of visual codes.

Former combatants spent over two years participating in workshops that yielded 420 paintings essential to the history of Colombia; 90 of these works are included in the exhibit, but all are vital to understanding the threads in the tangled web of violence choking the country; to seeing the naked truth; to helping to confront and recognize events; to unraveling and understanding them; to assuming the pain of the other; to facing the reparation that must be made to victims; to questioning ourselves; to constructing a collective memory; to building a lasting peace.

These visual confessions—terrifying, many of them beautiful, heartbreakingly cruel, extremely naive, painful, irritating, unbearably sad, certain of them sophisticated, all of them unprecedented— have

2 For more information on the show *Arte y Violencia en Colombia desde 1948*, curated by Álvaro Medina and exhibited from May to July 1999 at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, consult the catalogue published by the Museum and Grupo Editorial Norma.

3 This is the name given to the period from 1948 to 1953, characterized by extreme cruelty in both the exercise and representation of violence.

4 José Alejandro Restrepo, *Cuerpo gramatical. Cuerpo, arte y violencia* (Grammatical Body. Body, Art and Violence), Bogotá, Ediciones Uniandes, 2006, p. 21.

the power to position us inside a semiotic framework unlike that of the alienating media spectacle, that by bombarding the thoughts and impulses that lead to transformative action with photographic images more than information, seems destined to lead only to a kind of indecent voyeurism or, in the best of cases, to a gradual acceptance of the abnormal as normal.

Susan Sontag warned us about this acceptance when she spoke of photography, "Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs, think of the Vietnam War, (for a counter-example, think of the Gulag Archipelago, of which we have no photographs.) But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real."<sup>5</sup> Imre Kertész put it differently when speaking of acceptance: referring to Auschwitz, he stated that mass assassination is nothing new, "but rather the continual elimination of human beings, practiced methodically during years and decades until it becomes a system next to which people live normal lives, children are educated, lovers stroll, the doctor is visited, professional ambitions are pursued along with other desires, the public dreams, the melancholic sunsets, people grow, succeed, fail, etc. This, along with the fact that one becomes accustomed to the situation, gets used to fear, together with resignation, indifference

and even boredom, is a new and even recent invention. To be exact, this is what's new: it is accepted."<sup>6</sup>

The fact that violence has become the normal way in which social conflicts are transacted in Colombia is not only a consequence of the conflicts themselves or of a lack of political will to transform reality; it is also due to habit, or, a distancing from a reality that imposes, among other things, routine media language that, in the words of María Victoria Uribe, "has turned violence into the epicenter of daily life in Colombia."<sup>7</sup>

The possibility of inhabiting this new artistic territory, full of contradictions, with an essential imbalance between form and content; a territory with no prepared discourses or official truths, completely un-familiarizes our perception. This un-familiarization—an essential condition of the artistic experience—, by forcing us to abandon conventional approaches, makes us see for the first time the complete problem in all its complexity. This is exactly the reason these paintings are pertinent: they demand an explanation.

Also essential to these works is the information regarding the conflict, its actors, the geographic context and the sociological and psychological reasons born of the use of plastic language. These paintings, organized using visual codes that do not belong to the rhetoric of spoken language—narrating through color, structure, proportion, symmetry and asymmetry— allow us

to see both what is meant to be said and what is not; what the conscious mind suggested and the unconscious allowed. And so we have access to information provided not only by what is represented of the conflict, but also through the forms of representation.

The interaction between pictorial language, with all its poetic power, and the narration of specific events confronts us, in a collision, a crisis between language and content that, far from softening the events, heightens contradictions that may underlie the layers of history where evil has accumulated.

Some may argue there is a risk of neutralizing the content by seeing so much atrocity expressed in such naïve language. Nevertheless, it is the friction between form and content that becomes information in and of itself and part of the wealth of information that filters through the cracks exposed in these paintings. The ingenuousness of the language used is information that reminds us, among other things, of the limited access these actors have to education.

The transgression of visual conventions, such as perspective, reveals the psychological dimension of the rank and file soldiers' perception of authority. Whereas in Western perspective the difference in size between two objects speaks of the distances perceived by the observer, in these paintings the factors inscribed in the (dis)proportions are the result of the mystification of hierarchy,

5 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977, p. 20.

6 Imre Kertész, *A Moment of Silence at the Wall. The Holocaust as Culture*, Hamburg Essay cited by Carina Blixen in *Reflexiones de un sobreviviente (Thoughts from a Survivor)*, Montevideo, Brecha, September 5, 2003, p. 8.

7 María Victoria Uribe, *Un rostro nos mira desde la vacuidad de la violencia. La obra fotográfica y visual del artista colombiano Juan Manuel Echavarría (A Face Looks Out at Us from the Vacuum of Violence. The Photographic and Visual Work of Colombian Artist Juan Manuel Echavarría)*, in *Bocas de ceniza (Mouths of Ash)*, Milan, Editorial Charta, 2005, p. 48.

of “courage”, of power; they are a recognition of the capacity for cruelty, conditioning factors when ensuring obedience, or fear of punishment.

And through the scale relationships between protagonists and landscape we also sense the magnitude of the problems inherent in habitat; in a beautiful geography, arduous and overwhelming; in the immeasurable distances; in deprived regions and coveted lands, rich and fertile, where institutionality and the principles of sovereignty were not considered at the time land was distributed, appropriated or dispossessed.

Of particular interest in these paintings is the ordering of subjects based on the structuring of the images. A generalized tendency to focus on civil populations and place them at the central axis of the pictorial space, making them cardinal protagonists, prioritizes their quality as victims in this conflict. This, which may perhaps constitute an unconscious admission, is nevertheless a rotund confirmation that the rural civil population is the greatest victim of this war.

Often, the authors of these paintings resort to similar symbolic representations to express the intensity of a certain event. A good example of this is the use of color: An intense red spreads blood over the sky or across a river, and black can deafen or truncate nature in conjunction with human life; fallen and mutilated trees are frequent and predictable in a jungle context; however, their

recurrence and selective placement in these images transforms them into allegories of affliction in which nature and the subject seem to suffer the same fate.

In order to bring these paintings closer to the public, crossing subjective autobiographical visions with other more objective information about the stories, and in an attempt to attune them to the density and multiplicity of the subjects and processes to which they allude, the exhibition has been organized around a sequential script conjugating a variety of life stories with recurring themes from the conflict. The show starts with paintings that invite viewers to reflect upon the initiations into the different organizations, including the biographical episodes that often led individuals to join these groups; it continues with everyday representations and testimonies of their assorted violent acts, punishments, sexual abuse, revenge and forced disappearance; it goes on to narrate different facets of war: drug trafficking, complicities, land theft, exploitation and devastation, displacement of peasants, and then delves deep into the planning and carrying out of massacres and confrontations, before finishing with images of the various circumstances leading them to abandon the conflict, such as capture, desertion, amnesty, or even suicide. The exhibition also offers an opportunity to think about the role of words, their ability or

insufficiency when the time comes to know the truth and instrument peace and social reconciliation; that is, to decide what to do with this truth.

The voids in this exhibition are not oversights, but constructions intended to both draw attention to the word’s limitations and point out the risks of silence.

The conceptual support for this book-catalogue lies in the multiplicity of theoretical approaches to the paintings, in the specific, complementary, and at times contradictory but informative analyses provided herein, and in the aforementioned blank spaces. The reflections offered by those knowledgeable in the Colombian conflict—experts in history, social anthropology, psychoanalysis, art history and geography—are essential in helping us to deconstruct the paintings, in understanding the events and constructing thought. The sum total of approaches, the weft of these diverse points of view, allows for exploration of the “critical habitat” of the Colombian conflict as a weave of semiotic systems where physical territory and intellectual habitus, the field of ideological forces, economics and ecology, must not be separated.<sup>8</sup>

To create meaning is one of art’s qualities. Our expectation is that the texts included herein help to unravel this meaning by introducing us to readings with political, economic, historical, social, cultural and psychological contexts filled and infused with the Colombian conflict in which

8 In these terms Emily Alter speaks of the notion of “critical habitat” in *The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats*, in *October*, # 99, MIT Press, 2002.

the urban and the rural have become dissociated, the legitimacy of State sovereignty loses clarity, and certain citizens distance themselves from the pain of others.

The singularity of the elucidations that both denotatively and connotatively respond to these paintings, as well as the different ways of understanding them referred to at the beginning of this text, are paradigmatic of the instrumental value of art, of the significance of the works and their exceptional interest, beyond any other aggregate therapeutic value experienced by those who made them.

Also relevant is the contribution made by the work in the exhibit to the construction of Colombia's historical memory. As mentioned in the *Primer Gran Informe de Memoria Histórica de la Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* published with regard to the Trujillo massacre, historical memory is no substitute for justice; it is a "place for recognizing differences with an aim towards an inclusive project, and in this sense is also a platform for dialogue and negotiations [...] Memory is made and truth is constructed, for the victims and for society, to transform the past we want to overcome."<sup>9</sup>

Talk of memory generally refers to the past; but in Colombia's case, the construction of a historical memory is even more urgent because the past is still enmeshed with the present. That construction, a kind of collective confession—as recognition

of the drama and the injustice of an interminable war—, is essential in order to build the future.

Social peace and reconciliation are not possible through the complacency of forgetfulness.

9 In *Primer Gran Informe de Memoria Histórica de la Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación*. Trujillo. *Una tragedia que no cesa* (First Large Report on Historical Memory from the National Committee for Reparation and Reconciliation. Trujillo. *A Tragedy with no End*), Colombia, Editorial Planeta, 2008, p. 28.