

Authorship, non-authorship

During the past fifty years, the practice of leaving the impeccable and proper realization of a work of art in technically expert hands has acquired a rare power. Artists have deliberately limited themselves, in these cases, to providing the idea of the work they wish to materialize and inspecting the manufacturing process until finally, following the necessary corrections, it is approved and authorized for exhibition. Naturally, the name of the technician who executes the work disappears in the process. And, to tell the truth, no one is very interested in knowing who that person is anyway. And so it has been since sculptors began sending the clay models they made themselves to the foundry to be cast in bronze by others. At the very most, the expertise of the best foundries was recognized, and they in turn acquired merit and fame without their contributions leading anyone to think they were responsible for the artistic quality of the pieces that came out of their forges.

The above is pertinent as we find ourselves faced with a show

whose authorship, in my opinion, is twofold, and this double authorship must be considered separately if each of the two levels is to receive the proportion of recognition it is due. Those who have followed Juan Manuel Echavarría's artistic career know perfectly well that the central and sole focus of his work is political violence. He has taken on and treated the subject in different manners and through very diverse media with results that have left their mark. The very complete catalogue for *Bocas de Ceniza —Mouths of Ash (2005)—*, which I will be citing later, can be consulted for more details. The pages of this catalogue reveal Echavarría's sole desire to get to the bottom of the problem flogging us; he is interested only in preventing the meaningful details of the great collective and ongoing tragedy we have suffered from slipping past us.

Given the variety and intensity of the thematic subtleties at stake, the artist has been forced to multiply his means of communicating with the public, depending on his findings in the field. Echavarría, as a serious and dedicated researcher of violence, has acted as an anthropologist, a

psychologist, a sociologist, a historian, and a human rights activist, but above all as an artist. His piercing sensitivity seems to have seized the moment and resolved the dilemma of separating and differentiating in each case his protagonism as an author, something inherent in artistic creation, from the protagonism of the victims and perpetrators.

Media such as photography and video, or the objects and documents salvaged from the scene of a crime, made him responsible for and the author of their exhibition. The artist Juan Manuel Echavarría defined the canvas, laid the plans, and established sequences in certain cases, in others he set up the guidelines for exhibiting on the white display cube in the museum or gallery. As viewers, we appreciated this and committed ourselves, from this point forward, to unraveling the implications and meanings in his unique proposals. His authorship was foremost and we accepted this as normal and irrevocable.

Now, in *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN*, his authorship seems to fade a bit. To state that he is the author of this grand exhibition may seem arbitrary.

But let us remember that his overriding obsession, for many years now, has been to show, without distorting or beating around the bush, events related to the undeclared civil war, its different features and nuances, that has affected the country since 1946. If on one occasion he photographed human bones and on another he exhibited the school supplies abandoned by children from a village school, events which in both cases were put on display to remind us or inform us of the traumatic consequences of violent political actions, I believe I can state that his testimonial concerns took a marked turn with *Bocas de ceniza*, or *Mouths of Ash* (2003-2004), which features displaced victims of war singing. What did his chosen subjects choose to sing? Their pain and their slaughter, expressed through musical compositions written by each of the seven extraordinary protagonists of this moving video.

To call these seven artists extraordinary is to admit that their individual merits cannot be eclipsed or ignored. *Mouths of Ash* is in fact a precedent in two-tiered authorship, which in *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN* takes on a very special slant for one simple reason: Each painter in the exhibition is every bit as much an author of his work as the composer and singer in *Bocas de ceniza* is of the musical piece he or she agreed to interpret in front of Juan Manuel Echavarría's camera. However, we must recognize that, like in films, there was a director who

on another level conceived, directed, assembled and even encouraged his collaborators with a creative sense that neither denies, hides or diminishes the participation and individual contribution of each one of them. The concept of two-tiered authorship is linked to an undeniable reality.

Naive, or not naive

If *Mouths of Ash* emphasized the profound pain of survivors of violence who, to save their lives, must abandon their homes and seek refuge in other lands, a task Echavarría achieved by going deep into emotional territory, *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN* is the other side of the coin. This time the perpetrators present us with their testimonies. This is a sizeable group of men and women who were part of armed illegal groups, who had the misfortune to play the part of aggressors in the fratricidal struggle.

How were these aggressors to provide the testimonies solicited by Echavarría? I think there were three possible ways in which the project could be executed: a) write it down in your own handwriting; b) tell it to someone who would transcribe and polish the oral account; c) paint what you participated in, what you saw, lived and felt on the battle field. Echavarría is not a journalist and, therefore, one understands his method of bringing together some of the aggressors from our collective tragedy and inspiring them to express

with lines and colors their traumatic experiences. In the definition of two-tiered authority I gave above, the painters freely express themselves and Echavarría communicates the results, a division of labor which I feel is clear and immediate.

But how to paint without knowing how to paint? This is a false quandary. There is no one who does not know how to paint. If a small child can do it, an adult is no less capable. The foreseeable result is naive or ingenuous. In his notes on Rousseau, *The Customs Man*, Guillaume Apollinaire speaks of "bonhomie populaire" or folk ingenuity, which the French poet and critic linked to what he called "peasant painting."¹ This is how he defined a school of painters with no schooling, which in time became a commercial gold mine aimed at tourist markets in certain Third World countries. Due to the changes suffered under pressure from unscrupulous peddlers, naive artwork has become suspect. Its Achilles heel resides in the way these paintings are now based on fantasy with no grounding in collective reality. The commercial naive painter fantasizes but is not imaginative, and is gratuitous but not substantial. It is possible to be ingenuous in one's form of drawing, coloring or composing, but not in subject matter. This is why *Customs Man Rousseau* occupies a place of honor in the history of art.

Colombia's substantial example of a naive painter was Noé León.

1 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Indépendants*, 20 April 1911, in *Chroniques d'art*, Folio Gallimard, 1960, p. 208.

His arcadic world, so similar to that of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was connected to his youthful experiences working at river ports along the Magdalena during the long, slow journey he made from Gamarra to Barranquilla in 1920.² The tardy revelation of his paintings unleashed a wave of ingenuous imposters in the 1960s and 70s. It must then be said that if Noé León was capable of being coherent and respected was because he dedicated his later years to painting, based on his personal memories, the provincial Colombia that began to disappear with the advent of industrialization. His epigones, however, painted what had never existed, a task guided by something akin to idiocy. Their efforts gave rise to a candy-colored world of cookie cutter houses, trees, mountains, skies and clouds. Worse still, what was depicted in these candy floss settings was insipid, a defect Noé León avoided by setting himself the poetic and consistent task of recovering his own lost era.

The painters in *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN* don't imagine, they testify. They do not, therefore, commit the mistake Apollinaire referred to as "excessive sentiment."³ They were the protagonists of the tragedies that they now, conscious of the atrocities they committed, show us in great detail. If the foundation or starting point of any good naive painter is literature, since he or she is concerned above all with narrating experiences, those who

participate in this exhibit are naive. But, if we look at it from another angle and consider the fact they are motivated above all by fundamental ideas, so important they command interest inside and outside Colombia, this approximation changes radically because at the root of what we are seeing there is not the slightest ingenuity. We see confessions and revelations, nothing more and nothing less, linked to a painful episode in national history.

Document, non-document

All confessions are documents.

By document we mean something that teaches, instructs or proves the occurrence of a certain episode from the past. Although the academic definition reduces the meaning of document to something set down in writing, in practice it also incorporates the visual image. One of the most repeated types of testimonial in the history of the arts has focused on wars and their consequences. Whether conquest or liberation, the victors appeal to artists for exaltation of the heroes. Thousands of these images appear in public monuments and in museum collections in every country, commissioned to ensure posterity does not forget the heroic gestures of what has occurred.

In fact, posterity never forgets what it gratefully approves. An example of this in Colombia is the series of paintings by José María Espinosa

of the Southern Campaign (1813-1814) led by Antonio Nariño from Cali to Pasto against Spanish rule. In every sense, Espinosa's battles, now hanging in the Museo Nacional de Colombia and the Museo del 20 de Julio, are the most direct and palpable predecessors of the paintings in this exhibit. The following confirms it:

- Espinosa, like all his contemporaries, was also a naive painter.
- Espinosa was a protagonist and witness of the battles he portrayed.
- Espinosa painted what he painted in the interest ensuring that the events would not be erased by the passage of time.

Essentially, these three considerations apply to the painters summoned by Juan Manuel Echavarría and gathered together by Ana Tiscornia in *THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN*. Not one of the painters has surrendered their will to tell the story, truthfully and in great detail, of what they saw or participated while bearing arms. Naturally, we do not stand before the emancipating heroic and plausible gestures that José María Espinosa put on canvas in the 19th century; these are vile crimes, massacres, rapes, ambushes, anonymous graves and treason, the horrors created and disseminated by historic circumstances throughout Colombia at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. The subject matter is not edifying, but confessing to it is.

2 I've written an entire chapter on the meaning and implications of the paintings of Noé León in *Poéticas visuales del Caribe colombiano al promediar el siglo XX (Visual poetics in the Colombian Caribbean in the mid-20th century)*, Bogotá, Molinos y Velásquez, 2008, p. 191-213.

3 Apollinaire, op. cit.

As with naive painting, when it's good it has a seductive charm; the initial approximation to these works of art tends to be equally naive. The colors attract, the drawing provokes a smile, the image hypnotizes, and the whole is pleasant. It is a visually good-natured world. But then, with the second approach, the horror becomes evident and the viewer loses his or her original innocence. Smiles evaporate. The work is no longer innocent. We stand before meticulously represented episodes in which blood flowed and death reigned in territories that look like paradise.

The intention of telling without omitting a single important detail is palpable in the map format chosen for many of the paintings done by these new artists. Presented simultaneously as a plan view and from the front, the landscapes display spatial ambiguity that in the end makes for clear as well as suggestive interpretation. Paths, roads and rivers appear as they would on a detailed map of the site, while the houses, forests, mountains and skies rise up vertically in wide panoramic views. The solution is ingenious. It is interesting that this technique was used by most of the painters involved, to the point of seeming almost a studio brand. The phenomenon stems from the need for a protracted as well as a precise approach to narrating the events in these military confrontations.

Whether they fought for one group or another, these painters were

all soldiers. And whether commanders or simple subordinates, their movements were guided by strictly military principles. In displacement and attack, while defending or retreating, the tactics employed were subject to topography and based on a knowledge derived of coming and going through mountains and jungles, the vital experiences detailed and guarded through cartography.

The painter's resources

The experience accumulated while moving through the bush settled in the memories of the future painters. This explains the emphasis placed on the vastness of the natural settings they moved through constantly. In marked contrast, the bloody events are often reduced to almost miniature details. It is this combination of scales that leads us to initially see paradises and not infernos in many of these paintings. The goodness, the tropical country, stands out and immediately astonishes. The badness, the violence, is discovered later, although it lies at the heart of the work. A product of subtlety or modesty, the solution makes efficient use of the subject matter and plasticity.

After contemplating two or three of these paintings, the spectator's attitude changes completely. Only then does he or she begin to look for what really counts, what the former combatants-turned-painters experienced and lived first hand.

It should most certainly be said that those who consult this catalogue will find it difficult at times to comprehend certain horrific details included by painters unwilling to leave out a single meaningful detail of what transpired during a given event. (For example, the footprints marking a path taken by aggressors.) Other events may be missed due to difficulty in unraveling the meaning of certain markings such as the tiny brown rectangles that break up green pastures and indicate places where graves were dug. I'll add one more example: severed heads strewn haphazardly. It is worth repeating that although the technique used by these painters can be called naive, this cannot be said of the conscious efforts in their work to narrate the war that those of us who follow it from a distance have never experienced.



Detail

Cat. 55

It is important to note the cathartic aim, which encourages the painters. United by a common desire to give preeminence to the idea that obsesses them, ingenuous children and painters are usually explicit. They don't beat around the bush. In this case, the dramas played out by these artists (each of them situated at the center of the bellicose operations they've painted, or in the peripheral security rings surrounding it) are clearly revealed in the color images they have recreated, images that define the nature of the belligerence unleashed in the battles they waged to extend the territories they occupied through force. This said, let's return to what I mentioned at the beginning of this article, "The practice of leaving the impeccable and proper realization of a work of art in technically expert hands." The minimalists were conscious that in order to exhibit an impeccable structure with a rigorous industrial finish the best thing was to have it done at a studio equipped with the appropriate technology, and experts ensured perfect compliance with the work contracted. The creators of minimalist objects followed in the tradition of sculptors who sent their designs to bronze foundries. The support Echavarría requires of these aggressors, however, is not technical. Who, if not the person responsible for violence, could tell the inside story of the victims' pain. It's never a question of technology or exper-

tise, but of authentic experience. Whatever skills they may lack, they more than make up for it by the truth of their testimonies. By bringing together these painters in order to continue the monumental project of revealing unknown aspects of the armed conflict, Echavarría is not striving for formal perfection; he wishes to communicate the unexpressed, from the very inside, never seen, heart of the problem.

Curling the curl

With a Goya like persistence, Juan Manuel Echavarría continues to sift through the horrors of the war in Colombia. To date he has carefully and persistently shown us the various facets of human violence framed by inflexible ideologies and stimulated by deliberate exacerbation of political passions. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I will summarize the aims of his most powerful pieces, in which almost all the images are metaphors rich in interpretive nuances. Let's remember that metaphors veil as they reveal. While they transmute reality, metaphors empower and provide its actual scope. With this in mind, I've reviewed some of his work and discovered the following: *Retratos (Portraits)*, photography, 1996. A set of worn-out mannequins, broken and ugly, dressed in new clothing. Decrepitude and appearances mingle; or a Colombia preoccupied with its nice image outside the country

and the longest armed conflict ever recorded on the continent, a product of formal democracy void of trained democrats.

Corte de florero (Flower Vase Cut), photography, 1997. Evokes a time in the two-party violence when Colombia's two traditional parties—the Liberals and the Conservatives—attempted to mutually annihilate each other. Although the bloody events lasted until 1964, the most famous cases occurred between 1946 and 1953. The series refers to the practice of "killing the dead" or mutilating bodies to create highly elaborate symbolic figures with the pieces in order to flaunt in front of their rivals and spread panic.

There is an obvious relationship between Echavarría's compositions and the Rococo compositions used in the plates from the 18th century Botanical Expedition. The Expedition plates were drawn and colored to record the flora of the former New Granada, and Echavarría's photographs are an ironic commentary on the manner in which esthetics and crime are combined in these violent acts.

Escuela nueva, found objects, 1998. Set of notebooks and text-books partially destroyed and sullied, abandoned by school children forced to flee the crossfire between warring guerrillas and paramilitaries. Destruction and the barbarity of death's horsemen, friends of the Old and disciples of the school of organized

political crime, prevailed over the act of learning.

La bandeja de Bolívar: 1999 (Bolívar's Platter: 1999), video and photography. A replica of a platter from the tableware the Liberator received while alive, stamped with the motto "Republic of Colombia Forever," is hammered into a cone of white power resembling cocaine. The "forever" has been smashed to smithereens. Those who live in and suffer the current Colombia understand that this piece speaks to us of the political, ideological, moral and institutional dismemberment caused by drug trafficking.

La María, collected objects, 2000. A group of worshippers kidnapped by a guerrilla group from a church in Cali survives captivity by collecting insects and small cards containing drawings of animals and flowers, which they carefully frame or protect in small boxes, mirroring the overcrowding forced on them by their captors. Taking them to the gallery, Echavarría shows us the remnants of a humble human activity capable of effectively preserving dignity.

El testigo (The Witness), photography, 2000. Almost always, certain fortunate people marked for massacre manage to escape and watch in horror from a hiding place the debauchery committed by criminals on family members and neighbors. In their thirst for vengeance, besides punishing civil populations, illegal

armed groups have wiped out entire estates to the point of causing a rival's economic ruin by executing all cattle and horses. The resulting photograph by Echavarría shows a cow that, in the middle of the night, seems to secretly observe an attack on his fellow cows. Compared with the violence unleashed by the animal within us, his look reveals an almost human expressiveness.

Guerra y Pa, video, 2001. Two parrots struggle for territorial supremacy on the top of a cross. They peck at one another, falling from the cross only to return to their post to begin the struggle anew. In the midst of this confrontation one of the parrots says "war" and the other responds with "pa" or "pow." The piece uses two complementary elements: A person said to talk like a parrot is someone who doesn't know what he or she is saying; and this truncated version of the Spanish word for peace, "paz," also onomatopoeically represents the sound a gun makes when firing. When the actors in the Colombian conflict speak of peace they are really talking about war, something their practices and behavior prove unmistakably.

Bocas de ceniza (Mouths of Ash), video, 2003-2004. One by one, the survivors of various massacres sing their laments. Their faces fill the screen, which becomes a frame that highlights every little emotional shudder. The last to sing finishes

by allowing a painful tear to fall. Because he is alive, he weeps. The cycle death/pain/life spins like a roulette wheel and the different phases blur. Because he weeps, he lives. Because others died, he weeps. Because others died, he lives.

Thomas Girst wrote: "Echavarría concentrates on individual suffering."⁴ The analysis of the above eight pieces prove this to be true. Even the cow-witness suffers from the long war. Allow me to extend Girst's idea to include how the artist not only tells of individual suffering, but of the exhaustion of an entire nation.

This exhibit, *THE WAR HAVE NOT SEEN*, moves along the social and human frontiers of the historical hecatomb we have been experiencing for over six decades. *THE WAR HAVE NOT SEEN IS NOW* added to the collection of terrible forms of violence referred to in *Corte de florero* and *Escuela nueva*, portrayed in the undone nation we discover in *Retratos* and *La bandeja de Bolívar*, which is the same violence suffered by the victims in *La María*, *Bocas de Ceniza* and *El testigo*.

With this extensive round of death and misery we had begun to feel a need for contributions from those who spread the suffering. I've spoken with some of the painters from this exhibit and have discovered in their voices and attitudes signs that they too have suffered. The perpetrators were victims of circumstances and of their own impulses.

4 Thomas Girst, *Knocking down walls. Politics and esthetics in the art of Juan Manuel Echavarría*, p. 161.

Recognition of this fact should lead us to peace, but peace in Colombia has been reduced, suddenly, to “pa.” “Pa,” says one side. “Pa,” echoes the other. It is the politics of war and war itself that Juan Manuel Echavarría has bravely denounced in each and every one of his works.