

## And when do the disappeared return?

### Each time we think of them

*Duelos* (2019), the most recent work by Clemencia Echeverri, is the result of a long process of field research through which the artist has developed concerns that have been present in her work for more than a decade. In the earlier video installation *Treno* (2007), Echeverri asked the question that thousands of people in Colombia ask themselves every day: where do the disappeared go? At once a life source for communities, the arteries through which the colonizing enterprise penetrated the country, and the sewers of many of our towns and cities, rivers have also become a huge common grave, especially during the intensification of Colombia's internal conflict.<sup>1</sup> *Treno*, an archaic word for a funeral song that was sung in the absence of the body, consists of two or more projections placed on opposing walls, thus situating the spectator in the middle. The work therefore leaves him to look alternately at the course of an impetuous river that presumably carries the dead of the conflict yet remains impassive before the cries that demand an answer. In later works such as *Sin cielo* (2017) and *Río por asalto* (2018),<sup>2</sup> Echeverri extends her analysis of the river as a pit into which the corpse disappears towards an understanding of the river itself as a corpse. Mining and the construction of a hydroelectric dam have proven to be a death threat to the river due to contamination, sedimentation and drowning, and likewise for the communities that derive their sustenance from it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to throwing the slain bodies into the rivers, some paramilitary groups forbade the soldiers to remove them and bury them, so that the spectacle of the unburied corpses would act as a public warning, a classic strategy in regimes of terror.

<sup>2</sup> Work presented at the 12th Bienal of Shanghai, China, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "Some rivers in Colombia have been, in their silent paths, witnesses to a story that we repeat unceasingly: endless fluids of what we have tried to amend. In addition to its apparent nature of landscape, rest and natural beauty, the river carries unheard and directionless voices; a juxtaposition of experiences in a country that proposes and tries to achieve reconstruction at

But the work that precedes *Duelos* more directly is undoubtedly *Elegía* (2017). This particular piece comprises a very slow zoom-in projected onto the ground and shows a pit at whose bottom the earth is removed almost imperceptibly. The work was inspired by the infamous Operation Orión,<sup>4</sup> a military act in which public forces shot down an undetermined number of young people in Medellín's popular neighborhoods and,<sup>5</sup> as was later established thanks to the testimonies of demobilized paramilitaries,<sup>6</sup> disappeared the bodies by burying them under tons of rubble. Echeverri poses uncomfortable questions but avoids giving moralistic answers; her works are powerful both visually and aurally, but lack didactic narratives or obvious conclusions. This space of indetermination is filled

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every step, but which drags with it a ballast of history tied to horror.” In *Sin Cielo*, the river is the sick body. Decades of systematic and irresponsible exploitation have turned it into a moribund, poisoned, sedimented, deviated, blocked and repressed body. All rivers are the same river because they all flow into one another, and so the ruin of one river signals the fate of many others downstream. Echeverri also sees the environmental disaster in political terms: “a ‘moral ruin’ that has profound effects on the political, social and ideological dimension of the territorio-río.” José Roca, fragment of the text for the catalog of the exhibition *Pasado Tiempo Futuro*, Museum of Modern Art Medellín, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Operation Orion was a military operation carried out between October 16 and 17 of 2002 in San Javier (*Comuna 13*), Medellín. It was commanded by members of the Colombian Military Forces, the Colombian National Police and the Colombian Air Force, in connivance with paramilitary groups. Wikipedia, accessed 31 May 2019.

[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operaci%C3%B3n\\_Ori%C3%B3n](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operaci%C3%B3n_Ori%C3%B3n)

<sup>5</sup> The official and unofficial figures range from less than 100 to more than 300 missing young people. In any case, even one forced disappearance is already a tragedy.

<sup>6</sup> “In these operations (called Marshal, Power, Torch and Orion) 138 people disappeared who were then looked for in a superficial act of appearances by the Prosecutor’s Office in 2015 in the vicinity of La Escombrera, after being located at the site by detained paramilitary member alias Mobil 8. When this search was carried out I managed to be present at the site of La Escombrera after various difficulties. The aim was to remove the debris that for years had been deposited by dump trucks that climbed the mountain on a daily basis to unload their materials. The local version is that the mutilated bodies were mixed into these dump trucks in order to make them disappear. Today, the site is a mountain of high proportions.” Text sent to the author by the artist.

by the spectator, who contributes to the work with his/her own cultural background and convictions, thus establishing relations of identification or rejection according to one's own political position. Placed in the mouth of the pit we find ourselves faced with a vacuum, faced with the vertigo of being *there*; in a country like Colombia, where political leaders still claim that the armed conflict never happened, this is no small thing. As the philosopher Stephen Zepke aptly states, 'our place there, at the edge of the hole, is to resist the attraction and to remain a witness. If only to finally say that the murmuring hole, its invisible attraction and its dark and shadowy form, exists.'<sup>7</sup> Echeverri's installations never leave us unmoved: they put us to the test. Sometimes with a sensorial overload of visual and auditory information and sometimes with just the opposite, namely confinement, darkness, slowness, subtlety and absence.

*Duelos* is the inaugural piece of the space/work *Fragmentos*, a project conceived by the artist Doris Salcedo as a counter-monument and a place of collective mourning, as well as an exhibition space.<sup>8</sup> As is widely known, *Fragmentos* arose from the peace agreement between the Santos government and the FARC guerrillas, and was created under the specific mandate that the metal products of melted weapons be used to create a sculpture.<sup>9</sup> Salcedo presents an 'inverse architecture',<sup>10</sup> leaving open the ruins and remains of what

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/elegia>

<sup>8</sup> For further information, see: <http://especiales.revistaarcadia.com/contramonumento-fragmentos/el-punto-de-vista-conceptual.html>

<sup>9</sup> The agreement established the creation of three works of art: one in Havana, Cuba, the seat of the peace talks; one in New York, at the headquarters of the United Nations (won in a public contest, for which I was a judge together with Clemencia Echeverri and Lisandro Duque, by the Colombian-Chilean artist Mario Opazo); and *Fragmentos*, directly entrusted to Salcedo to be made in Bogotá.

<sup>10</sup> For this project, Salcedo worked in close collaboration with architect Carlos Granada.

was originally a built area to construct upon the original courtyards of a colonial house in the historic center of Bogotá, covering the entire floor with metal tiles made from the metal of the weapons.<sup>11</sup> The irregular texture of the tiles is the result of a collective and therapeutic action, a 'sculptural catharsis': female victims of sexual violence perpetrated by different actors of the conflict hammered their anger and frustration into the aluminum plates to give shape to the casting molds. As a result, each tile is unique, just as is the case for the story of each participating woman.

Salcedo's strategy for involving the viewer comprises a refusal to erect a sculptural piece that might be perceived as an object, as an outside. In *Fragmentos* the viewer exists inside the work. He is involved with all his corporality, he has no choice but to walk upon the work, and he can only live the experience if he agrees to become immersed in it. In a war waged by poor youths in rural areas of the country, and experienced by the rest of us through the media from the comfort and relative safety of our homes, Salcedo's gesture is truly transgressive. *Fragmentos* constructs a participant viewer who is unable to escape from the most disturbing implications of the work.

Like *Fragmentos*, the work that receives it, *Duelos* also proposes an enveloping space that occupies the walls and the floor; one in which the viewer can be found immersed, inside

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<sup>11</sup> The above went against the orthodoxy with respect to the recovery of patrimonial architecture, where it is required that the built areas be restored and the patios respected as free zones. *Fragmentos* does exactly the opposite, but it exists precisely because it is conceived as a sculpture, not as an architecture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Austrian architect and polemicist Adolf Loos said that only the funerary monument and the memorial belong to the field of art. Everything else is construction. *Fragmentos* is at the same time a place of commemoration and a collective grave where the pain of the victims rests, imbued in what remains of the weapons of the perpetrators.

and involved. The absence of color removes any anecdote from the image, giving it the grave and somber tone of testimony. Sound is the protagonist here. Just as the unspeakable will always move in the indeterminate space of rumor and truths will unravel in a multitude of fragments mediated by political expediency, the sound in *Duelos* is not univocal or hierarchical but assaults the participant from multiple points of speech. Sometimes surreptitious, like the unintelligible whisper of many voices trying to make sense of what is by definition inexplicable, sometimes frontal and forceful as the thunderous noise of the machine, of the rubble falling down the side of the mountain, and of the earth crunching under the weight of the successive layers of (history) material. Resistance is improbable. We can always close our eyes to avoid involvement with the unnamable, yet covering our ears is much harder.

La Escombrera, a place referred to in *Elegía*, is also the starting point for *Duelos*. It is a huge mountain built with debris from the buildings and demolitions of the city of Medellín, materials that in themselves bear witness to the death of architecture. As mentioned earlier, it was there that the bodies of the victims of several military operations and subsequent forced disappearances were buried.<sup>12</sup> After three lustrums of uninterrupted filling, the dump has become a huge manmade mountain that, with its geological proportions and accumulation, layer upon layer, of cultural material, poses a paradox: everyone knows that the bodies are there, hidden in plain sight, but they also know that it will be almost impossible to exhume them. The reluctance of both the authorities and the operator of this iniquitous dump – a privatized site, as happens in liberalized economies where there is a constant loss of public facilities – prevented the

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<sup>12</sup> According to several consulted sources, it may be the largest mass grave in Latin America.

search for and exhumation of the corpses when it was still possible. Today, after years of incessant filling, it is almost technically and financially impossible to carry out the search.<sup>13</sup> When in 2015 a very hard-fought initiative was finally brought before the state by the families, the Prosecutor's Office agreed to remove debris in order to search for the missing bodies. At the same time, Echeverri traveled to the site to witness this effort to claim truth and justice on the part of civil society. The resulting collective action that took place in the Escombrera was at least a symbolic conquest. As Echeverri points out, 'when the earth is touched, physical areas are marked that destabilize presence in a territory that is not only physical but also affective, this again produces hopes, bringing the past into the present and stirring family histories.'<sup>14</sup>

*Duelos* doesn't contain an argumentative narrative but a dramaturgy. The piece begins with projections on the floor of the site (once again, it should be remembered that this is not a neutral material: *Fragmentos* is the opposite of the so-called white cube). *Duelos* tries to communicate the sensation of the smallness and impotence of the spectator before the enormous scale of the mountain-cemetery that inhabits the exhibition space with visual and auditory images. The sound and the penumbra set a tone of gravity that, despite the size of the projections, manages to move the work away from any association with a show. The smoky ground creaks and seems to contain something that moves. This 'telluric pain'<sup>15</sup> is accompanied by murmurs, whispers, snippets of words and phrases that

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<sup>13</sup> Some studies estimate that it would take more than four million US dollars to undertake an adequate search.

<sup>14</sup> Echeverri, text sent to the author, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> "[T]he movement, the spasm or the symptom of a 'telluric pain' suffered by the body of the landscape speaks to us of the violence of which it is a silent witness in its radical

are barely enunciated. Cascades of voices fall like broken glass, pieces of life that are broken forever. Next, the ascent to the top of the mountain by the dump trucks, full of debris, begins. The subjective camera pursues the truck from different points of view, always slightly off center, thus producing a sense of anxiety and disorientation. We see through a low-angle shot the slope of the mountain where the dumping of the rubble is evident, as it rolls down the slope. The avalanche arrives in successive waves and does so incessantly. At times a continuous bass, akin to a lament, accompanies the avalanche. Ascension, fall...is the memory a form of resurgence? As is understood by those who insist on remembering the names of the victims, reincarnating the body in the present is a form of resistance to power because, as the victimizer knows, when the body disappears, the act of mourning becomes impossible, or at least difficult. The bodies, although absent as an image, are implicit in *Duelos* and we, the spectators of the work, can try to participate in this mourning for the others. Placed symbolically at the base of the mountain, watching the rubble roll towards us, we can ask ourselves: How do we talk about the disappeared person? Any conclusive answer remains elusive, yet we can venture to give one: with our emotions tightening inside.<sup>16</sup>

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precariousness,” Echeverri writes in reference to a previous work, *Sub-Terra* (2017).

<http://www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/sub-terra>

<sup>16</sup> Where do the disappeared go?

Search in the water and in the bushes

And why do they disappear?

Because we are not all equal

And when do the disappeared return?

Each time we think of them

How do you speak to someone who has disappeared?

With our emotions tightening inside

Rubén Blades, *Disappearances*, 1984

How to finish a text about an artistic work that doesn't propose conclusive judgments and which is considered an open work? Echeverri poses more questions: 'At this point it is important to consider the body in relation to memory and war, in order to clarify how the body is part of spatiality within these contexts. When we know that physical violence is literally exerted on bodies, what then happens to the body at the time of remembrance? How do you get involved in the narration of violence? And if it is also space, how can we involve it in the spatiality of violence? How does war also make the body a spatiality and/or a place of memory?'<sup>17</sup>

**Jose Roca, 2019.**

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<sup>17</sup> Echeverri, text sent to the author. *Memorias de Violencia, Espacio, Tiempo y Narración*. Elsa Blair Trujillo