

Sonorous Rubble, Mourning Affect

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Translated from Spanish by Caroline Amy

The word *escombro* (rubble) encompasses the paradoxical crux between a desire and a certainty. On one hand, the desire for a certain expulsion or purge, the violent fantasy of removing something from sight, of making it disappear. On the other, the inevitable certainty of the matter that resists it, that which appears and stubbornly reappears with the irreducible weight of its gravity and the tenacity of its inertia. Derived from the Latin prefix *ex* (to place outside) and the Celtic word *comboros* (pile, obstacle),¹ *escombro* describes the material presentation of violence inflicted on matter; a matter that wants to be placed out of the realm of the visible or, better still, of that which may become visible. It's no coincidence that the rubble of buildings is piled up far away from the eyes of its inhabitants, outside of cities and their vigilant lights, where urban brightness condemns animate and inanimate bodies to ostracism, loneliness and the oblivion of all that we do not wish to see. An abandoned remnant piled up and exposed to the degradation of its weight like handfuls of dust in the air, rubble is nevertheless a precarious obstacle for the consummation of the violence of disappearance. Obstinate in its precariousness, it is an obstacle that recalls impossible erasure. Like the embers that burn with the breath of the fire that consumes them, the presence of this rubble reminds us that there is no body in this world, no matter how vulnerable its appearance might be, whose materiality can disappear without leaving remains behind. The wind is always loaded with ashes.

Since mid–October 2002, every day and every night the wind that blows across the mountainside of the Comuna 13 in Medellín has covered a fenced and unoccupied terrain reserved to *remove from sight* the debris that is incessantly piled up therein. Human debris lies beneath the rubble of private constructions that has been hoarded there during almost two decades. Human *escombros*: the bodies of the unburied victims of Operation Orión, the most intense urban – both military and paramilitary – ‘anti–terrorist’ operation in the history of the Colombian armed conflict.² In the most recent video installation by Clemencia Echeverri, that very same land, the land of La Escombrera (The Dump), moves and stirs before our eyes and beneath our feet under the impact of the debris a dump truck discharges, as many others

have done before, onto the layers of sediment that conceal the largest urban mass grave in Latin America. This action, the action of *escombrar*, is repeated with a halo of ominous quotidianity across six simultaneous projections. The violent desire of erasure is staged each and every time: each dumping comprises a paradoxical attempt to consummate the disappearance of unburied bodies by means of an ignominious and macabre burial. As such, these bodies are deprived not only of life, but also of every vestige that might restore their dignity by claiming their presence in a grave that can grieve for their absence. And across each projection, in every instant, the very impotence of this violent desire becomes evident when faced with the fragile materiality of the remains. Human debris are still *there*, always *there*, beyond what the eye can perceive, in the depths of an earth that trembles, vibrates, and bellows with the blow of the pieces. Hence the obsessive need to repeat the impulse, to continue to *escombrar*.

Echeverri's sharp ear senses the perverse intimacy that lies between the silence of La Escombrera and the corpses that the earth both shelters and hides. Her work listens to this loud silence; she knows it has not been drowned out (indeed, that it cannot be) by the muteness to which the rubble seems destined for once it is excluded from the palace of History. As the verses of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita proclaim –verses that listen to the choir of the *detenidos desaparecidos*, a choir restlessly fluttering in the sand and salt of the immense Atacama desert– “all of the stones scream. They scream, the Chilean desert screams. Nobody would say this is possible, but they scream.”³ No one would say this is possible, but in the sonorous rubble of *Duelos*, in the roar of its deafening avalanche, countless bones vibrate from within an invisible abyss. Bones scream in a tongue rendered rubble of anger and pain: a tongue that accuses the violence breaking it, expelling it from all that might be said; a tongue that thus makes resonate the ruins of its telluric and cracked body. *Duelos* works to open up a channel through which we might listen to the aural vibration we share with the disappeared bodies, one that invades us by shaking the very marrow of our bones. Listening to their voiceless voice: this the difficult task that the work confers upon us. To open the body and to expose it, without reservation, to the stubborn cry that inhabits each piece of debris. To listen to the chorus of slain lives that resonate therein. To remember and reclaim their presence *in this world*, here and now, with the dizzying bellow of their ruins.

How might we come to hear the meaning of this bellow, this rumble that tears, dismantles, and *makes ruins* (*hace escombros*) of the consoling stability of any intelligible meaning? The reverberation of the sonorous *escombrera* extends into the aural space of the video installation, which thus demands an approach to listening that must be anchored in the body, in its material and vibrational quality. The unburied, invisible and untouchable body that does not appear in the images, the one that lays beneath the earth, shaken by its collapse, is a body that *appears disappeared* in the propagation of the wave produced by the sharp blow of the rubble. Echeverri's attention to the inexhaustible textures of sound, to the relieves of audible landscapes and to the latencies of inaudible frequencies, is the key to this sonorous (dis)appearance. In the texture of the chorus of debris, in the warp of its overwhelming and shocking convulsion that spans across ten channels, the bones of La Escombrera also vibrate. Imprinted on its virtual body, every soundwave bears the marks of the material bodies within which it resonates, bodies whose imprint survives in the timbre of its invisible materiality. Just like that, the disappeared body reverberates –and this is not a metaphor: that is the point– on the surface and in the depths of what the ear is able to hear in *Duelos* as a resonance box. The body cries, and its cry does not say anything. It vibrates before and after everything that can be said. Its meaning lies in its *being sensed*, in the intense sensation of its echo, and its becoming flesh and bone under a skin *that listens*: our affected, inhabited, and shared skin.

The body listens from the inside, deep inside, beyond all traceable interiority, an uncomfortable and moving presence that agitates and inhabits its cavities with its touch. The body feels, and it does so in the intimacy of this strangeness. Yet neither feeling nor sensation are the only elements at play. The sense of meaning (*sentido*) vibrates in the body with greater intensity, moving beyond what language might say and beyond what might properly be named, this is to say, what might be uttered with a *proper* name. Inhabited by the intimate and alien presence of sound, by its unprecedented and unheard load of resonant bones, the body hears a meaning that penetrates it with a force that breaks the sovereignty of language and the subject. The body hears a disappeared meaning, a vanishing sense, that nevertheless appears, in literal terms, on the surface of the skin.

According to Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, “the era of disappearance is marked by the disappearance of the corpse as the last sign of a language that no longer promises access to sense”.⁴ a senseless language, a language without meaning and without the potential to provide it. The vibratory energy of *Duelos* makes this senseless disappearance of the corpse perceptible to the body that senses it. The sense of disappearance does not fall under the logic of the sign; it shakes and thus fractures it with the embodied intensity of affection. Precisely because it is affective, this incarnation interrupts the replacement of the disappeared body with a sign that can provide a consoling meaning to its absence by abbreviating, and thus redeeming, the distance and violence of loss. Affection emerges from an interval that cannot be filled: the improper gap between form and content, between cause and effect, between signifier and signified.⁵ Its intensity resists the consoling continuity that runs between one and the other, that which language tries to articulate by summoning a proper, accessible, and meaningful sense to be uttered. The sense of affection, its being *sensed* as that which severs the logic of signification, provides a gateway to the impossibility of this access to meaning. Its stuttered and afflicted language –a language that invades, expropriates, hollows out the meaning of my own words– does not shorten the distance, nor does it redeem the loss. On the contrary, this language underscores disappearance because it can only remember the disappeared body by doing so: it brings the echo of its absence *as absence* close to the heart.⁶

As the plural of its title suggests, the resonant body of *Duelos* sets in motion) a collective action of mourning in the materiality of the bodies that participate in its vibratory wave. Our bodies’ incarnate affects sense the absence of the corpse in the intimacy of the distance that the vibration itself installs as it unfolds in space. The mourned body and the mourning body touch without touching: they sense each other in the body of the wave that goes from the mute cry of the former to the shaken heart of the latter. The living body trembles, listens: its cavity receives the resonance of the disappeared bodies that inhabit it, that survive in its interior dwelling precisely because they resonate *within it without being it*, in the caesura that the echo opens along its way. This aural survival, a survival without return and without resurrection, renders the mourning body –each body, but also their

vibratory assemblage— a chamber for the cry of the inhumed bone. One inhabits the other in the infinite wake of the echo that simultaneously unites and separates them.

It is no coincidence that in this video installation the unheard vibration of the bones in the rubble literally inhabits the vibration of mourning voices. Echeverri intertwines the scream of the sonorous *escombrera* with a chorus of crumpled and faltered words spoken by *Mujeres caminando por la verdad (Women who walk for the truth)*⁷ This truth is the truth lying in the sense of their mutual resonance, one in which the story of each disappeared body is sensed, claimed and accused, in its hollowing out of all instituted and institutional forms of discourse.. In effect, the voice is “the material element recalcitrant to meaning; if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely that which cannot be said”:⁸ the body of language that language itself cannot speak nor articulate as a signifier. The affective and affected voice of the mourner, of each suffering mother, is thus the body in which the disappeared body reverberates as a beloved presence vibrating in the silence of each word, in the intensity of its unspeakable core. This double body inhabits us in the immersive experience of *Duelos*. If something is heard here, if something is remembered here, if something returns to the heart along the path opened by its inconsolable sense, it is only the certainty and the claim of the affective distance —the echo, the resonance— in which the corpse can touch us, intact. It is only there, amid its moving hollowness, that the absent body may appear lost both within and like the abyss that the force of violence wishes to erase, to disappear, to reduce to rubble under the debris of history —of *its own history*. How are we to respond to the tremor of this intimate and nameless memory, to its buried double cry, to its precarious claim of presence in a present in which the existence of these rubbed lives is placed in doubt?

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The images and sounds of the audiovisual *escombrera* found in *Duelos* follow the same law: the law of gravity. The untimely wave of debris that invades the visual field is prolonged in the rhythm of the soundwave that is amplified, with its vertiginous affections, in the bodies that inhabit are themselves inhabited by other bodies in the room:: the unheard bodies of the disappeared, the vocal bodies of the mothers, and the resonant

bodies of the visitors. One and the other—namely the wave and the wavelength, which are the same—turn towards the gravity of the bottomless depth sustaining them. One and the other fall into the inscrutable and abysmal profundities of a ground that trembles with them from its very foundations. The chorus of debris and voices flows along the path of a deep voice whose guttural chant is nothing but pure vibration: the material sediment and scaffold of everything that can be spoken. In its grave frequency, the fragmentary, rubble and subterranean sense of all that the building of language would like to expel from its presumably stable structure is piled up. In Echeverri's words, "the sound of the choir comprises a low voice that runs underneath everything, indicating the ground and thus the underworld: that reality that has been vastly covered and overlaid by the years."⁹ This muted and deafening ground, this mass grave to which bodies were thrown to be buried unburied, is literally the ground that gravity covers and overlaps with the rubble falling on the projections: it is the invisible floor we step on, the implicit space out of the frame. The inertia of the collapse virtually extends to the rigid yet subtle, solid yet hammered surface of the metallic tiling of *Fragmentos*, the other floor that we step on in *Duelos*.

The signifier and material operator of armed violence, of its instrumentalization of the bodies mounded as rubble in the incorporeal data of the archive, is transformed in *Fragmentos* into a common space, a common ground: a metallic skin molded by the blows and traces of the pain of those who survived. As Carolina Sanín writes regarding Doris Salcedo's slabs of molten weapons, the ground "is the clearest signifier of the law, [...] that of mortality and that of gravity. Every ground we tread is made of the dead and is made of the past. Everything that has been has fallen and today is part of the ground."¹⁰ Subjected to the ineluctable force of this double law, the signifier of violence and its instrumental rationality becomes the signifier of the exposure of all bodies, of every living and dead body, present and lost, to the gravity of death and time. It becomes the signifier, then, of that which *does not signify*, of the inertia that mocks and points out the violence of signification: the signifier of its sensible and sensitive depth. Inscribed as an audiovisual palimpsest on the pained and bereaved surface of *Fragmentos*, in its space of memory, *Duelos* reminds us that the earth still vibrates and must continue to vibrate with the choir of the underworld

of rubble that survives in the delicate hardness of its skin. With its stubborn insistence on the intensity of their resonant bodies, it reminds us that this soil of ours is and can only be common if we learn to listen to the grave and abysmal tone, as firm as it is disarranged, of the mourning affect that shakes it and shakes us today and always, without truce and without rest.

Like the floor that comprises *Fragmentos*, the common ground of memory, with both its shared and fragmentary support, holds itself and holds us together only if the space in which the vertigo of violent loss, the painful and infinite gravity of its distance, becomes the space of a common experience: the experience of strange intimacy, and intimate strangeness, between the bodies that inhabit each other in the time of their mutual resonance. Experiences anchored in the passibility of flesh and bone, such as the ones produced by the somatic effects of *Duelos*, bring us together in our similarly shared and fragmentary exposure, always relational and always incomplete, to the chorus of disappeared lives that vibrate in the fabric of our bodies *here and now*. Our common exposure, then, to the scream that resounds in the affective, rubbled and indelible senses of the present. This common exposure is the only ground upon which the present of the post-agreement era can be based in its fragile tenacity: a present built upon the grave memory –deep, sedimented, abysmal– of the land of the dead and of the past that afflicts it, encourages it and nurtures it. If “every sensation is a question, even when only silence responds,”¹¹ then *Duelos* exposes us to the sensation of the ground of the present –the ground of memory– as the sensation of an inconsolable question. In its affective interpellation the invisible, unheard and unarchivable rubble of history resounds: the rubble of *our* history, of its latencies and its silences, of its stubborn resistance to the violence of the number and the oblivion of the letter. In brutal harmony with the clamor and the claims of this question –a question that incessantly disturbs the laws of every discourse and every consensus– *Duelos* echoes the silence of the underworld within this world. It listens to the gravity of its language. It sings with it.

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¹ “Escombros” in Joan Coromiras, *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Madrid: Gredos, 1987), 245.

² As the Grupo de Memoria Histórica states, “On October 16, 2002, Operation Orión began, the largest armed action that has taken place in an urban territory in the context of the country’s armed conflict. This operation was extended throughout the month of November and early December, and was carried out by the joint forces of the Army, the DAS, the Police, CTI, the Prosecutor’s Office and Special Anti-Terrorist Forces, with police tanks and support helicopter gunships [...]. The operation saw the participation of paramilitaries who had carried out previous intelligence work and accompanied the authorities in their search and seizure work of supposed guerrilla collaborators” (80). See the report *Desplazamiento forzado en la comuna 13: la huella invisible de la guerra* (Bogotá: Taurus, 2011).

³ Raúl Zurita, *Inri* (Madrid: Visor, 2005), 65.

⁴ Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, *Heterografías de la violencia: historia, nihilismo, destrucción* (Santiago de Chile: La Cebra, 2016), 260.

⁵ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect” (*Cultural Critique*, vol. 31, 1995), 85.

⁶ The verb *recordar* (remember) comes from the Latin voice *recordari*, itself derived from the prefix *re-* (repetition) and the root *cor* (heart).

⁷ *Mujeres caminando por la verdad* is the name of the oldest group of mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of the *desaparecidos* of the Comuna 13 associated with Operation Orion. Their collective and community work for the recognition of the victims of forced disappearance, and for the families’ right to truth, justice and reparation, won them the National Prize for the Defense of Human Rights in Colombia in 2015. The group’s commemorative actions and political influence have been decisive in the arduous process of excavating the human remains buried in La Arenera, one of the sectors of La Escombrera.

⁸ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 15.

⁹ Personal communication with the artist.

¹⁰ Carolina Sanín, “Los Fragmentos de Doris Salcedo: una obra verdadera y un discurso falaz” (*VICE*, 17 December 2018, https://www.vice.com/es_latam/article/d3bexy/los-fragmentos-de-doris-salcedo-una-obra-verdadera-y-un-discurso-falaz), para. 9.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qué es la filosofía* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1993, trad. Thomas Kauf), 198.