

River by Assault: poetry, politics, eroticism¹

His work [as a dancer, the Bailaor Israel Galván] consists of emerging and evolving before everybody's gaze... He attempts to build each moment during the time he dances as an event of mystery and 'jondura' (depth). Let depth emerge... To dance only with pure and simple truth... The dance is what produces and invents, as a blossoming of gestures and moments, "depth" and "interiority". 'Jondura' is born in the 'jondo' dance and not the other way around.

Didi Huberman, *The Bailaor of Solitudes*

Like the "Bailaor of solitudes", beautifully portrayed by Didi Huberman, the river in this recent video-installation by Echeverri, literally and metaphorically embodies a vital force. Made evident on six synchronized screens, its wild turbulence violently erodes its own gorge while indiscriminately carrying away everything that falls into its torrent. Its voice, forcefully conveyed through seven speakers, expresses its great power thus magnifying the images of the unstoppable current. In *River by Assault* the images and sounds are rhythmically intertwined in order to make the river's identity become present in its flow; for the viewer to experience the impact of the events assaulting it, and share its resistance and rebellion. The images and sounds allow the river's "depth" to emerge.

Just as it ravages and erodes in its path, it penetrates the surrounding soil. It fertilizes, spreading nutrients, like a blood stream. The shadows of the vegetation on the river's moving surface attest to its life-giving power.

Sometimes calmly sounding, other times roaring such powerful body of water incorporates in its flow all the sediments that come from the shores, i.e., fallen trees, as well as the trunks of those that have been annihilated by deforestation. The falling sound made by the cut trees as they pound the water, denounce those accountable for their fall.

As the detritus covers and makes the river's surface –which is the artist's canvas as well, visually and aurally shimmer, it traps and makes evident in a disturbing way, all the non-organic debris that has been produced by uncontrolled and inconsiderate human consumption. The amount of trash is so abundant that it nearly chokes the river. Its surface, which otherwise has a reflective quality especially when calm, becomes opaque.

¹ Clemencia Echeverri created this work by invitation to participate in the 2018-2019 Shanghai Biennial.

As a consequence, spectators see a deadening reflection of themselves. A reflection that does not show the vital force in its transparency and translucence, but rather in the denial and disappearance of its existence – but not its defeat.

The torrent perseveres in defining its trajectory. It is compelled to divide and subject itself to go forcefully through locks and tunnels. These structures have been built to dominate and subjugate its power in order to produce electricity. On the projection screens, the massive buildings of the electric company contrast offensively with the river's light and swift organic flow. The staccato thud alerts us about the impending threat. Addressing such insult with a potency strengthened by every obstacle, the body of water rebels making the structures explode ravaging everything, including human lives. The images are charged with violence as they show the water's destructive power; a violence that summons the triumphant cry of nature when something attempts to restrain it.

The river appears to be mightier after the assault. Still flowing, (but now more calmly on a flatter terrain with less obstacles), the meandering water begins a reciprocal seduction, by approaching and distancing, welcoming and rejection gestures with the sea, its final destination. This encounter is ambivalent; not only due to the erotic conflict of the bodies of water that takes place within a beautiful luminous and chromatic atmosphere, but also because of the lacerating images of dead mangroves that in the final projections cover the screens completely and ominously, just as the trash had done previously.

The river has finally and triumphantly arrived at the sea. The mangroves, on the contrary, incapable of rebelling and escaping have died choked by the absence of the needed balance of fresh and salty water. Paradoxically, the mix that the river becomes as it dissolves in the ocean.

Like with many previous video-installations by Clemencia Echeverri, the current text originates from an affective and reflective reaction made possible, in part, by the immersive and distancing techniques used by the artist. However, the artist's sensitivity that lets the river express itself in its utmost vitality transcends any technical virtuosity. Like the "Bailaor of solitudes" she takes the risk of empathizing and in tuned to the

river's fascinating and passionate force allows it to suggest essential questions. The spectators too, are invited to address unavoidable issues that arise as they interact with the work, i.e., what is the difference between the violence of the river and that of the assaults it suffers? How could a reciprocally positive balance be achieved between the life of the river, the nature surrounding it, and human needs? If the river's death occurs when it dissolves in the ocean, how should death be interpreted when it is the result of deforestation, diversion channels, dams and choking activities that threaten many living things as a consequence of preventable imbalances and indifference?

Beyond concrete answers, becoming one with the river, its poetry, its politics and its eroticism as the work suggests, the viewers encounter a deeper and more complex awareness, "pure and simple truth"; it provides insightful intuitions and knowledge challenging us to decipher the keys revealed in the river's powerful visual and aural imagery and vitality.

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