

An Art of Life and Death; Clemencia Echeverri's Audio-Visual Installations.

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The darkness is full of noisy shadows; they beat and breath, howl and cut, they cry out violence. These sights and sounds unsettle us — *unheimlich*. Clemencia Echeverri's installations embrace us in the uncertainty of their dark light, where our home is not our own, and we wander in the night. Their images and noise make us stumble, mumble, shiver as they pursue us. Too near, too close, they reach out, touch and disturb us. We feel these brutal, beautiful images invade our bodies, even if this action refuses the logic of narrative. Echoes, scratches, sounds of puncture. Cries, shouts, howls of nature. Everything emerging from an underworld, foreign to this one but nevertheless part of it. A dark breath hot and sweet on our cheek that we do not understand, a panicked cry that goes unanswered. This is an art of life and death, of their banality and grandeur, of their rhythms passing around and through us; sometimes sustaining, sometimes destructive. We do not understand Clemencia Echeverri's work, we feel it.

The artist works in the midst of a long-running civil war that has wracked Colombia for decades, a war that seems so all-pervading that people simply refer to it as *La Violencia*.¹ This situation challenges art's very existence, it asks what art can do when death and violence are normalised, and clichés and vested interests seem to control its representation. Faced with this dilemma, modern and contemporary art has generally tried to engage with politics by negating itself as 'art', as if denouncing its own aesthetic nature and methods would allow it to engage with 'real life'. Clemencia Echeverri's work takes a very different path. Although her audio-visual installations often begin from actual events, or from a specific research project, her aim is neither documentary nor discursive, and instead she utilises aesthetic techniques to explore the emotional and historical complexities of the conflict in Colombia. The work seeks to affect its viewers emotionally, and it is on this level that it intervenes 'politically'. Clemencia Echeverri's work is therefore political, but in a way that remains committed to the aesthetic realm unique to art. It is this combination that makes her work so singular and so powerful.

The work begins from facts, from something actual. *Muta* (2006) begins from a performance of Hamlet seen from the President's box in the Colón theatre, *Voz/Resonancias de la prisión* (2006) from visits the artist made to Colombian prisoners in England and Bogota, *Treno* (2007) from a distressed phone-call received by the artist that told of someone's disappearance, *Juegos de Herencia* (2008-9) from a violent ritual performed in El Valle, a town on Colombia's Pacific coast, *Casa Intima* (1996) from the demolition of a family's house to make way for real estate 'development', and so on. But these 'facts' are not simply documented in Echeverri's installations, and she does not treat them as empirical or incontrovertible. In fact, her work does not give us much 'information' about these events at all, and nor does it try to critique them through a rational argument. Instead, actual events are treated as raw audio and visual material for the artist to shape into an art work using fragmentation, concentration, exaggeration, and other highly 'artistic' techniques. In this way, Echeverri's work does not present a piece of 'factual' information, it creates an overwhelming experience. The 'fact' or 'truth' in this work is always a profound sensation that is more ambiguous, troubling and heartfelt than any political opinion. For Clemencia Echeverri this is precisely the power of art, and the only way it can be political.

Before diving into this mysterious heart of Clemencia Echeverri's audio-visual installations, let's first look at some of the artistic techniques she uses to achieve it. All of these are methods drawn from the avant-garde tradition of film-making, and are not found on television. The most important

¹ My essay reflects the fact that I am a white, European man who knows little about the complex history of Colombia. Although I have visited the country several times, I do not understand many things in Clemencia Echeverri's work. I hope this does not mean however, that I cannot also, in my own way, appreciate it.

are the separation of sound and image, the fragmentation of linear time and narrative through editing and multi-screen presentation, and the total emersion of the viewer within the installation. The term 'audio-visual' is very appropriate, because one of Echeverri's most obvious artistic strategies is to separate sound and image, and to refuse the normal privilege given to sight. Rather than the image carrying most of the information, which the soundtrack merely supports and corroborates, it is often the sound that provides the active 'image' of the work, which the visual element supports. A dramatic example is the aural explosion of the fighting cock's claw piercing the screen in *Exhausto aún puede pelear* (2000). All the force is carried by the sound, and the image merely illustrates how it was made, a shadow of the sound's violence. While image and sound appear co-ordinated here the sound goes further than its image, shocking the spectator and continuing its journey within us. In this way the 'sound-image' explores all the resonances of its violence beyond the screen it has literally just burst through. This is a typical moment in Clemencia Echeverri's work, it converts the 'fact' of what it records into an affect, something shared by the work and the spectator who experiences it.

Juegos de Herencia is another good example. It begins from the documentation of a ritual held on the Pacific coast of Colombia, where a rooster is buried in the sand up to its neck, and then beheaded by a blindfolded young man. While Echeverri has an anthropological interest in this ritual, which seems to have originated in Spain but lost its historical meaning in travelling to Colombia, the purpose of the work is not to explore or explain this shift. Indeed the work deliberately employs an 'artistic' montage technique that fragments the action of the ritual, making its details and chronology unclear. Furthermore, she refuses to show the final, fatal, decapitating blow, and instead we only hear its hollow percussive sound, which shocks us with its resonance. Once more, this resonance escapes the image's documentary frame (already disrupted by the editing) to cross the gap between the viewer and the object. This is the gap sight usually maintains, a distance that allows our 'intelligence' to privilege information over affect, rational analysis over our more emotional states, and objective analysis over the intimacy of feeling. In Clemencia Echeverri's work this gap collapses.

What is the purpose of this artistic strategy? First, it allows the work of art to directly 'touch' its viewer, who flinches at the sound of the piercing claw in *Exhausto aún puede pelear*, or the machete's killing contact in *Juegos de Herencia*. We experience this struggle and the final end of life with our body, we feel its sound both emotionally and physically before we 'understand' it. Second, this experience carries us, encourages us, forces us to go beyond the 'facts' that produced it. What does this mean? Let's take the example of *Voz/Resonancias de la prisión*, which began from conversations the artist had with Colombian prisoners in English and Colombian jails, and that she then used in an installation at the National Museum in Bogota, a building that was originally a prison. On the end walls of the long corridors of this panopticon she projected images of the same corridors, extending them into infinity. As the viewer walked in this disquieting space movement sensors activated prisoner's voices recalling memories of their homes and families, and expressing their feelings of frustration and confinement. We thereby experience the psychic and physical claustrophobia of being locked up within a space that was once a prison, but these feelings are neither entirely subjective (ours) nor entirely objective (theirs), neither entirely imagined nor entirely documentary, but seem to float 'in-between', combining and abstracting these two positions. The feelings provoked by this installation begin from the distance between the museum visitor and the prisoners, but in the process of experiencing the work this opposition dissolves, and we are in the midst of something that belongs to none and all, simultaneously. If this experience is neither subjective nor objective, then what is it? It is something abstract but very real and actual, an abstract feeling that slips between our normal categories of description. On the one hand, the work abstracts the feelings of the prisoners by fragmenting their stories, enabling us to attach them to our personal memories and states of mind with which they seems to echo. In this way the work confronts us with how we are all prisoners, how we all suffer loss or confinement. But on the other hand, the work

also seems to impose its abstraction upon us, to the point that the feelings we experience escape any subjective specificity. The intensity of the work's experience becomes all-encompassing, the claustrophobia (for example) so pervasive that we cannot reflect upon it, we cannot find a space apart from which we might understand it, and so own it.

This experience of being overwhelmed is encouraged by the mis-en-scene of Echeverri's installations. They almost always involve multiple, large screens and an amplified soundtrack, which occupy the entire exhibition space. *Treno* is perhaps the most dramatic example, where opposed wall-sized projections seem to drown the visitor in the rushing waters of the Cauca River, located in the artist's home province of Caldas. While the work was inspired by a phone call from a panicked local woman searching for her disappeared son, it does not narrate this common event of political violence, or attempt to document it. *Treno* instead focusses on the river, the violence of its rushing waters, the impact of its sound, and then, from out of this chaos voices cry out names, cries that remained unanswered. And as these voices ring out we see a hand holding a branch fishing clothes out of the river. We might think that *Treno* is in this way suggesting a simple metaphor — that the violence of the river is *like* the political violence of Colombia. But while this interpretation is not wrong, it still remains on the surface. *Treno* gives us something more powerful than meaning, it imposes on us the overwhelming force of its feeling.² The violence of the river submerges us, carries us away, removes us from the stabilities of life that ground us. It confronts us with the sublime sensations of a war that has wracked Colombia for decades, sensations that both belong to the spectator but also sweep them away, overwhelming the 'I' in an intensity of feeling that goes beyond any particular subjective perspective.

What does this mean? There is no doubt that Echeverri's work has a political intention, but this does not make it 'political art' as we normally understand it. Political art usually poses 'counter-information' against the prevalent narratives that support vested interests, or critiques the mass-media mechanisms that disseminate this propaganda. Clemencia Echeverri's work does not, she says, try to provide an 'informative commentary' on events, but rather produces art works that give a direct contact to them, works 'whose aim is to produce silence, commotion, and respect.'³ Drawing on the agonies defining the history of Colombia, both past and recent, she projects sensations into us that we recognise, but whose force also starts to dissolve our identity, our interiority, as an abstract realm of sensation emerges, a kind of interior-outside within us.

Version Libre (2011) gives a very clear example of this. Like *Juegos de Herencia* and *Casa Intima*, *Version Libre* adopts a documentary format, although here it is that in which anonymous participants speak with their identity hidden. *Version Libre* immediately deconstructs this form however, through its outsize projections, the superimposition of images, its slow-motion and freeze-frames, as well as a distorted and fragmented sound-track. Most of the images show faces covered by a balaclava, something both ironic and confusing, given that they are speaking about their experiences as guerrilla or para-military combatants in the Colombian civil war, combatants who also use this mask in 'real life'. They speak about their work as soldiers as well as their experiences as individuals, two very different modes of discourse that on one side is chillingly detached, and on the other intensely emotional. This ambiguity is emphasised by the speakers raising their balaclava so that their words might be heard more clearly, a gesture that partially uncovers their face, suspending it between being depersonalised and identifiable. The images culminate in a combatant's confession that the love of his daughters made him want to stop fighting, during which he begins to

² Gustavo Chirillo has written a very beautiful essay on *Treno* that I refer the reader to; 'The Politics of the Scream in a Threnody', in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*. Edited by S. Zepke and S. O'Sullivan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. Chirillo has written many very insightful essays on Clemencia Echeverri's work, and I have been influenced by all of them.

³ Clemencia Echeverri, 'Interview', in *Sin Respuesta/Unanswered*. Edited by B. Santos. Bogota: National University of Colombia, 2009. p. 87.

cry and the camera zooms-in to a close-up of his eyes. His eyes demand our sympathy, because they express a 'good' and 'human' emotion that we can identify with. Two things emerge from this. First, there is confusion, given that we are normally encouraged to consider these people as 'evil' and as 'enemies' of civil society. This confusion highlights how the mainstream media construct such clichés in order to manipulate our feelings for political ends. More interesting however, is how this sympathy seems to take on a life of its own, an abstract existence that both connects, but also moves us beyond the individuals who experience it. When the 'Other' disappears, then so does the 'I' that defines themselves against it. Instead 'we' feel a sorrow, a pain, a love — beings of sensation, real abstractions that seem to exceed any of their instants. These feelings pass between individuals, creating a world within, but at the same time outside our 'own', a world that no one 'owns' and that only exists in common. In this emotional commons everyone shares the mask, because there is no identity when *we* shed tears, *we* love, *we* share *our* fear and pain. These sensations do not belong to an individual, they constitute instead a larger body from the emotional life of the people.

This aspect of Clemencia Echeverri's work is perhaps difficult to see in *Version Libre* because of its explicit references to the war, and the discursive nature of its soundtrack. It emerges more clearly however, in the recent twin works of *Supervivencias* (2013) and *Sacrificio* (2013), which were once again filmed in the province of Caldas, and shown simultaneously in Bogota and Medellín.

Supervivencias begins by showing us the distances that space out the world, that give each thing a place and time in which to endure, in which to taste existence. We fly over mountain peaks caressed with mist, and then see the flickering city lights that emerge between them — each one a home, a family, a story. From the distance of these aerial shots we are suddenly surrounded by the rain-drenched jungle, see people moving through it, before arriving at a house whose open windows and doors welcome us in the darkness. Soft voices mix with the rain, surrounding and reassuring us, before a procession of men start to climb stairs inside the house, sometimes slow and sometimes rapid. Their feet ring out a rhythm that beats like the house's heart, a sound so strong that it goes beyond its image. What is this sound? It is a rhythm emerging from the chaos of the world, a cohesion of non-personal *life* that flickers briefly in the house before returning to the thunder, smoke and fire that surrounds it. The house produces and protects this rhythm, and as our body responds to it something of its vitality is passed on, ensuring its survival. Echeverri's work often returns to this theme. In *Doble Filo* (1998) a hand stubbornly draws a house in the mud, which is then erased by a flood of water, before being drawn again. In *Casa Intima* real-estate developers force a family to move out of the house they had occupied for several generations, but in the repeated domestic actions of washing clothes, or even in the labour of demolition, rhythms emerge that speak of life's survival. And in Echeverri's latest work *Noctulo* (2015) four screens form the walls of a house within the gallery, showing in part the way a country house emptied by the forced re-location of its residents is now occupied by bats, who seem to both haunt and revive it.

Where *Supervivencia* shows us the survival of this vital rhythm in the house, *Sacrificio* seems to question it. This is why the two works have to be seen as a diptych, a necessary couple. *Sacrificio* shows the heaving meat of cattle as they run back and forth, scared, sweating and wide-eyed. Here order is imposed by the fence, an exterior restraint that seems to trap the animal in the confines of the heard's perpetual and unpredictable movement. Order and chaos do not form a rhythm here, where one emerges as the necessity of the other, instead the animal life of the cattle seethes within the imposed order of the farm, as if to show the rule of law that contains the intensity of our passions, channeling it, controlling it for the ends of those who want to exploit it. Where the rhythms of *Supervivencias* seem to bring its people closer to the animal, and suggest a living community, in *Sacrificio* the animal is controlled so that humans might enjoy a profit. This is similar to the remarkable close-up of the sacrificial rooster in *Juegos de Herencia*, which condemns us from the midst of a cruel ritual of which it is a necessary but uncomprehending part. Taken together, the twin works seem to suggest that the violence of control is something very different to a natural and living order. The question is, how can we move from one to the other? The difficulty of

doing so is made literal by the distance between the two work's place of exhibition, but does this distance also show a deeper connection? Does sacrifice and survival call each other into being, each immanent in the other, as if the rhythm of the house always produces the desire to own the animal, to control it, exploit it, treat it as an Other? Clemencia Echeverri's work faces this desire head-on, and acknowledges its political manifestations in the unending violence of her country. But in amongst these ruins it offers us a few moments when the spirit of life might enter us, touch us with its aesthetic rhythms and once again show us how to become an animal.

And at the end, an endnote perhaps — a pause, a silence. The calm beauty of *Quietud, Homenaje a John Cage* (2012) where people, people like us, sit and gaze into nothingness. A simple nothing, filled with the dignity of being rather than with rage or pain or darkness. These people like us enjoy a moment of internality, but one in which inside and outside seem to lose distinction before the pure presence of the here and now, the utterly full and meaningless presence of life. We see a pause in which specificity is replaced by singularity, and inside and outside become the same thing, the infinite noise of the everyday becomes the same *quiet*. This homage to John Cage evokes the calmness of permanent movement, asking us to listen to its chaotic *silence*. We go there sometimes when we sit in the sun and allow ourselves to be dissolved in the endless details of this moment. It cannot be described because this 'now' is a pure experience that exceeds all language.