

Clemencia Echeverri: The Space and the Phantoms

In her video-installations, Clemencia Echeverri questions violent dramas that arise between bodies, power and space in Colombia's present times. A story of ghosts more sonorous than visual.

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Translated from the original Spanish by Juan Julián Caicedo

In some regions of the Colombian hinterlands – marked by anachronistic Catholic prejudices – a medieval Christian folk motif still customarily heard is that of *The Wandering Jew*. The legend – shared in various shapes by many cultures – speaks there of a man (along the lines of the Biblical Cain) who, by reason of having insulted Jesus, was condemned to roam perpetually on god's earthly paths, without ever being able to come to a stop or settle down anywhere. As with most apparitions, he is not seen but sensed as a presentiment; one *hears* him. Thus the pathways of those vicinities are never truly deserted at night: the Wanderer transits them, again and again, leaving on his wake a trail of disconnected noises and tatters of anxiety in the air. An intractable land can well have the countenance of hell.

The country that Clemencia Echeverri's work brings forth appears also as a geography furrowed by ghosts that, like The Wanderer of lore, may never come to rest. Here, however, the malediction is no longer of divine origin, but one arising from the very worldly logic of violence, which has robbed Colombian bodies of their rootage, their settling grounds. Such a non-place is precisely what the greater part of Echeverri's video-installations allude to – that is, a covert power that withholds the spaces due to orphaned bodies, leaving them but one single alternative: to disappear and turn into a mere trace. Sound, text, calligraphy, decay, get scattered in the guise of impotent vestiges on the surface of a no man's land (or, increasingly, a land belonging to barely a few).

Thus, body, space and power appear as the protagonists of dramatic encounters and misconnections: the chosen prowling grounds of denial, destruction, absences, death – and, above all, the impossibility of a dwelling locus. It is a country of wanderers, a country of ghosts where history has turned into a fragmented nightmare, where shelter no longer has a roof over its head, where language has disintegrated into disconnected rustles.

Body and Territory (Neither Body Nor Territory)

In *Treno / Funeral Song* (video-installation, 2009), simultaneous screens project the turbulences of a mythic river, our ancestral "river of graves": a natural sewer that is the final resting place for the dead brought on by *La Violencia*. The rumble of water is permeated there by the cries of people calling on people, of relatives searching for their *desaparecidos* in the marshy chasms of geography and history. Mouths cast their calls upon the void, attempting to rescue their kin from the labyrinths of death, with their voices as Ariadne's thread. Names get modulated in lieu of talismans favoring the encounter, only to get lost in the hermetic pit of the night. Performing a sullen ritual whose recurrence harks back to immemorial brutalities, relatives searching for their own poke the waters with sticks until some sign comes to the surface: a shirt, pants, a shoe, as relics and traces

of the beloved absent body. That is the only answer to the call, and it comes to be in the caesura issuing from the lack of a language that may name what is occurring.

In those calls the artist has replicated, as pointed out by Marta Rodríguez¹, a popular tradition whereby peasants communicated in peace times with festive cries of friendship. That is to say, with their voices and chants they established the resonant territories and sites of belonging that constitute a human space. However, the silence on the other end of the current calls – which are no longer cheering but rather painful cries – stands as evidence for the slashes received by the fabric of neighborly relations and by the physical and sonorous territories that give a community its feasibility. In an expropriated and negated geography, the disappeared, annihilated body loses its dwelling as well. The only things remaining are the phantoms of voices and attire relics. The body in space is no longer possible in a country whose homes stand abandoned and where the function of physical and symbolic inhabitancy has been blocked.

Body and Domestic Space (Neither Body Nor Domestic Space)

It appears then that the *House* – with all of its symbolic connotations and its social implications – is no longer feasible in a territory exposed to savage currents and drifts of destruction. This idea had already been developed by the artist in *Double-Edged* (video-installation, 2004) where a woman's hands draw a house on a muddy surface with the elemental strokes of a child's sketch, until the moment when a rush of rusty water erases the house, leaving what is barely a drowned trace. Nonetheless, the woman obstinately returns to her drawing again and again, disregarding the fact that it will be unceasingly erased by that water which, more than a natural calamity, seems to emanate from the beat of death that drives the Colombian war.

In this piece the artist alludes to that imaginary of the Western tradition – and, clearly, to the Colombian one – which placed woman at the center of the house as the supporting stand for both family and society. While men conquered worlds, women – their feet firmly on the ground – engaged in the physical and mental construction of domestic spaces, bringing forth that architecture of shelter and refuge that Bachelard defined so well. Throughout displacements and banishments – radical upheavals of the logic of inhabitancy – inasmuch as men die, women alone assume the responsibility of reconstructing everyday life and the household in the space of exile. Those female hands, stubborn and elemental, perform a vital dance upon the darkness of death. Fragile, yet obstinate and mighty, they forcefully salvage the damaged functions of inhabiting those marshy and forbidden terrains that the conflict has spawned. The house has disappeared, its mental trace remains.

The women of *Intimate House* (1996) end up homeless in a different way. For this piece the artist also delved into a domestic and feminine world, though this one located in an urban context, with its own particular aggressions upon the function of inhabitancy. Echeverri records here the sonorous and visual story of the physical and mental plunder of a sheltering space. This one does not transpire in the violent altars of a collective war, but

¹ Clemencia Echeverri: *Sin respuesta* - Unanswered. Bogotá: *Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Dirección Nacional de Divulgación Cultural*, 2008, p 53.

rather in the intimate ones of a dwelling in one of Bogota's traditional neighborhoods, which was bound to disappear by reason of real-estate market pressures. The metaphor propagates here to the spatial awkwardness of contemporaneity, to the pauperization of inhabitancy, to the normative ordering of bodies, to the seriality and industrialization of domestic spaces. The *House* of Heidegger's – the one that is established as a potent axel between heaven and earth, with its roots deep underneath and its aerial windows, having a place in the cosmos, nested in an environment all its own, as sundial, astral observatory, fortress fending off the climate and the rigors of the outer world and of the soul, solid point planted in the scene – that *House* succumbs before the capitalistic and quantitative urges that turn bodies and dwellings into mere volumes, as Le Breton has remarked. Women of three generations turned into urban outcasts – not by actors of a war but by agents of speculation – must leave the place of their origins, their history, their roots. They must give up the house-home so that it may fall under the blows of urbanist merchants. The act is no less violent just by reason of being subtle, civilized: it is an act of plunder, the installation of a non-site, a forsaking of cornered bodies. But however it may be, the ruins of that house will remain impregnated by secret vestiges: a stain on a wall, the scars on wooden doors, a sunbeam that does not fail to arrive every afternoon to the place where there used to be a patio. Perhaps, that *Intimate House* is not merely a physical building, and those women on their way out will carry it within themselves, wherever they may go.

Body and Authoritarian Architectures

Likewise with the Colombian prisoners in jails of England and Bogota, who the artist interviewed during several months of visits, meetings and creative workshops that were instrumental in realizing her piece *Voice/Resonances of Prison* (2006). Throughout that extended field work Echeverri gathered a sound track from bodies wasted away in and by the penitentiary institution, by exile and, moreover, by an architecture of power and control. Bodies whose relations with their surroundings, with space, with the passing of time have been broken – those bodies are progressively dematerialized in a limbo where hands and skin lose all contact with the real, where feet no longer tread upon or rest on anything, where identities get deleted, where any inscription comes undone, where words can never establish a dialogue. Scarcity was what most impressed the artist in that arrested para-reality within which those once solid but now diffused bodies wander in an oppressive air that petrifies everything it touches.

Echeverri's intention was to unblock at least some of those persons' recollections, leading them on the path of the imaginary in the primordial house – that of the parents, of childhood. This, because the *Intimate House*, she seems to insist, is not always physical. So she recorded their whispered remembrances, filled with nostalgia, hate, anxiety, hopelessness: "A voice to the right, a voice to the left – contained and fixed. Maturity sets its gaze on girlhood – searching for places, for others, for desires." "They go back through the years, return and weep. They find layers of whitewash on a wall, in a school, on another wall. House, parents, family, the encounters go on increasing."²

Through that journey – starting in a blocked actuality and ending in a stray preterit – and having turned themselves into voices, the inmates were able to get past the physical

² Idem, p 107

ramparts of their prisons. So then, as immaterial sound waves, they could travel all the way to Bogota's *Museo Nacional* – a building that, in its origins, had also been a penitentiary structure. There, on the ground floor, the artist realized a video-installation through which she made those voices circulate amid walls that showed scars from the confinement of others who had been immured there as well at various times during the Twentieth Century. Further, to retrieve the missing memory of that site, the artist projected old photographs on the rear end of a vaulted gallery, whereupon the historical and the contemporary spaces appeared to endure and persist in a virtual order.

The end result was a dance of resonant and tactile phantoms. The voices of present-time prisoners came to rest on walls already charged with stories of interment, while the mere passing of a spectator's body would reactivate them. It was as though the old ghosts were regaining their presence in the current time. The sound track had made it possible to materialize them once again. The invisible and absent beings from the past or from exile, those bodies erased in a prison, could be perceived by the visible beings from the here and the now, through a transgression of the space-time coordinates and the laws of captivity. Beings incarnated as voices, redeemed by their own voices, came to assume in full the protagonism of their presence in a mis-en-scène where the spectator's body offered itself as the locus of their apparitions. Indeed, a drama of outrages perpetrated between bodies, powers and repressive architectures. Even if the body is immured, the mind is able to take flight. Even if the body has disappeared, the voice can make it solid once again. What a paradoxical story this is, of phantoms at once personified and disembodied.

Female Bodies and Acidias

In this line of reflection between space, power and body, an intimate, sensorial chamber work stands out, whose protagonist is a woman's body. In the year 2006, aside from dealing with the ghosts of prisoners, the artist served as medium for the restless spirit of Sor Josefa del Castillo, a refractory castaway of the *Santa Clara la Real de Tunja* monastery. That cloister, one of the most scintillating in our colonial history, lodged (or imprisoned) between its walls the body of Sor Josefa, Colombia's greatest mystic and author of *Afectos Espirituales*, a top work of the Spanish-American colonial literature. Although the monastery's church is overlaid in gold, and overpopulated with imagery in quilted furs, brocade garments and red wounds, the cells for nuns, just as Sor Josefa's, are as dark and austere as the background of a Gaspar Figueroa painting. That is where the mystic would shut herself in, to write and grapple with her phantoms. Echeverri, intrigued by such inner combat, realized amid those walls the video-installation *Anomie*.

The piece revolves around one of the nun's texts, which speaks of "Evil spirits that do not give up their persecution, day or night"; of "Miseries that abound in this banishment of body and soul"; of "Aches and maladies of the body." The artist projected on the ramparts the manuscript of that text and its calligraphy, using invisible ink on the white wall. An ultraviolet light made the nun's deeply dejected words appear and disappear at intervals. For Echeverri, *Anomie* (or *Acidia*, in post-modern critical discourse) stood as the figure that explicated the life and writings of Sor Josefa. "Acedia," the artist says, quoting Giorgio Agamben, is a condition of "distressing graveness and woe," as well as, "the inability to

control the incessant discourse of inner phantoms.”³ With this piece Echeverri intended an allusion to the profound sadness and melancholy that the mystic would have endured amid those ramparts – graves for her ego – as she was besieged by her inner phantoms, while being choked by the brutish demise of all sites upon earth that were off limits for the *Nueva Granada* nuns of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.

The cells for the colonial novices, nuns and mystics were, by antonomasia, a denial of their body and the annihilation of the feminine spatiality.⁴ Not in vain was admission to the cloister seen as a small death⁵ – a death vis-à-vis the world and space. Saint Teresa de Jesus made the situation manifest with her unmistakable inspiration: “Considering our long confinement as well as the scarcity of amusing things available to you, my sisters – and with the lack of enough housing as would befit some of your monasteries – I would advise that you seek consolation in the delights of your inner castle, since without needing license from your superiors you can enter and take a stroll in it at any time.”⁶

As the society of New Granada (then including Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela) denied the female mystics a space, a corporality or a public life, they were forced to turn inwards, to search in the inner castles of their spirituality for the mobility which they lacked in regards to the outer space. A woman’s body was not made to inhabit the world: it should be withdrawn, secluded, set apart – either in the house or in the convent. The confinement in female cloisters, demanded by the Council of Trent, “represents a symptom of the threat that is perceived in the body at large and particularly in the female body. The cloister’s walls are built as a means to immure the body, altogether to prevent its contact with other bodies and other spaces.”⁷ The linkage between female body and convent was so profound that the cloister’s walls ended up becoming extensions of her body: “Improvised, neutralized, de-corporified members of the nuns.”⁸ That condition of the female cloisters reinforced the social order of the Colony, whereby public life fell to men and private life to women – a status quo that survived well into the Twentieth Century. For women the only possible spaciality was the inner, the subjective one. Mobility was feasible only within walls, particularly those of the mind or of the heart. Any divergence from those instances was considered heresy.

With this piece we find ourselves once again in the field of phantoms, of banishments, of trapped bodies. Nietzsche praised the Greeks as a people in splendid agreement with life. We, however, cannot but reckon the deep disagreement that exists between Colombians and their bodies: a discomposure that harks back to the farthest reaches of our bodies, which the scourges of Catholicism have routinely christened. It is indeed a country of wanderers, of ghosts, of imprisoned, erased, annihilated bodies. A country made up of blocked spaces, broken territories and acedias is what Clemencia Echeverri’s perspective

³ Idem, p 75.

⁴ For a more extensive development of this analysis, see: Giraldo, Sol Astrid, *Cuerpo de Mujer: modelo para armar. Medellín, La Carreta*, p 100.

⁵ Quevedo, María Piedad, “Un cuerpo para el espíritu. Mística en la Nueva Granada: el cuerpo, el gusto y el asco. 1680-1750” In *Colombia 2007*. Ed.: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, p 85

⁶ Idem, p 247.

⁷ Idem, p 79.

⁸ Idem

brings to the fore with her commitment to subtle materializations amid so many squalls of dissolution.