

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Next" competition in 2005, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Next" was juried by Nicholas Baume, Chief Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Holly Block, Executive Director, Art in General, New York City.

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Real Art Ways is a multidisciplinary contemporary space, with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and visual arts, including exhibitions and public art projects, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

# Carlos Motta



On the cover: SOA: Black and White Pain-ting # 13 (detail), 40" x 40", archival inkjet print on canvas.

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SOA: Black and White Text (detail), chalk on wall, 40' x 30".



SOA: Black and White Text (detail), chalk on wall, 40' x 30".

## Carlos Motta's Hemispheric Counterpedagogy

By Yates McKee

Carlos Motta's *SOA: Black and White Tales* is concerned above all with the subject of teaching, both in the sense of a thematic topic to be historically investigated and as a formal, aesthetic problem regarding the construction of subjectivity itself in relation to language, vision, and memory. Motta's project addresses the School of the Americas (SOA), an institution established under the rubric of the U.S. Army in 1946 to train military officers from throughout the Americas in counterinsurgency techniques. Faced with a concerted campaign by human rights groups demanding that it be shut down, in 2000 the institution was reinvented as Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). Despite a rhetorical shift in emphasis to democratization, the WHINSEC has remained largely insulated from public accountability for the activities of its students, past and present.

Echoing what Hal Foster has recently identified as an "archival impulse"<sup>1</sup> in contemporary art, Motta displaces materials pertaining to the SOA and the struggles surrounding it into an art gallery, reconfiguring a space of aesthetic display as a pedagogical environment. The central

Carlos Motta's work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami; Alianza Colombo Francesa, Bogotá, Colombia; Alonso Garcés Galería, Bogotá, Colombia; and La Corte Arte Contemporanea, Florence, Italy. Motta completed the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (2005–06) and holds an MFA from Bard College (2003). His honors include the Cisneros Fontanals 2006 Subvention Grant, the Center for Book Arts' Workspace Grant for Emerging Artists (2005), and residency in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Program (2004). A faculty member at the International Center of Photography and Parsons School of Design, Motta is also editor of [artwurl.org](http://artwurl.org).



SOA: Black and White Pain-ting # 3, 40" x 40", archival inkjet print on canvas.

feature, a 40' x 30" band of blackboard paint that runs continuously along the length of the gallery wall, resonates art-historically with the lecture-performances of Joseph Beuys. Yet whereas the latter used the blackboard as a repository for the charismatic gestural marks of a "visionary" teacher, Motta deploys it for both its institutional and metaphorical resonances. As a pedagogical device, the blackboard evokes the disciplinary spaces of teaching and learning, training and inculcation, repetition and internalization pertaining to educational institutions such as the SOA. But as a material form, it is a surface of inscription structured by a series of metaphorical couples—memory and oblivion, appearance and disappearance, preservation and destruction—that bear more than a coincidental relationship to both the practices promoted by the SOA and the historical effacement of these practices in public consciousness. Indeed, the institution was responsible for training the leaders and operatives of some of the most notorious authoritarian regimes of Latin America, which detained, tortured, assassinated, or otherwise "disappeared" tens of thousands of their own citizens. Such governments operated under permanent states of emergency in which the suspension of civil liberties and the mobilization of exceptional forms of violence were legitimized by the imperative to preserve state security

against the mortal threat of an absolute communist enemy.

For Naomi Klein, the SOA is a fundamental point of reference in criticizing "our amnesiac torture debate,"<sup>2</sup> in which many prominent critics of the Bush administration, while locating the practices at Abu Ghraib within a larger chain of command ultimately legitimized by the State Department, have nonetheless treated them as an historical aberration in the longer trajectory of U.S. policy. If, as Klein writes, the historical imperative often sounded in countries emerging from periods of state violence is "never again!" the response of conservatives and liberals alike to evidence of such violence on the part of their own government has been to declare "never before!" Such claims to original innocence disavow the extent to which many of the justifications, concepts, operations, and techniques that became visible at Abu Ghraib have been part of U.S. counterinsurgency discourse for decades, especially as it was codified and transmitted in the training materials of the SOA, such as those declassified in 1996.<sup>3</sup> This historical amnesia, Klein contends, enacts a double effacement with implications for both the past and the future: "In U.S. collective memory, the disappeared are being disappeared all over again."

Motta's project grapples with how to make "disappearance" appear as such; rather than simply restore visibility to an otherwise obscure body of facts, Motta stages a kind of archival haunting in the precarious medium of chalk: along the blackboard the artist has dutifully copied down various

SOA: Black and White Pain-ting # 14, 40" x 40", archival inkjet print on canvas.



SOA: Black and White Text (detail), chalk on wall, 40' x 30".

graphic and textual elements from the SOA's own promotional materials, including its statement of principles, hemispheric maps, and various personnel and budget figures. But these official public utterances, marked in white, are traversed by a set of yellow marks that trace a counterhistory of the SOA and the claims for rights and justice that have accompanied it. A programmatic statement labeled "Promoting Democracy," for instance, is surrounded by the abstracted outlines of demonstrators, one of whom displays a sign reading "STOP THE KILLING." This figure is minimally identified by a sacerdotal collar, a detail that alludes not only to the religious imperative of bearing witness that informs the ongoing movement to shut down the SOA,<sup>4</sup> but also to the fact that numerous victims of SOA trainees were affiliated with liberation theology, which reads the universalizing claims of Christianity in terms of social justice for the poor. These chalk outlines conjure the generations of anonymous ghosts for whom protesters are called to publicly testify every year in Fort Benning, Georgia.

A similar kind of ghostliness is operative in a series of three uncaptioned, washed-out archival photographs that have been blown up in black and white on a separate wall of the gallery. Two have been reduced to near obscurity, with only the rough contours of bodies, some standing and others prone, as enigmatic evidentiary traces of violence; a third image features assembled soldier-students standing at attention while taking a testamentary oath, apparently being addressed by—and responding to—an authoritative institutional voice.

Motta displaces just such a voice into the gallery by installing a speaker inside an informational display table; while perusing historical documents connected with the history of U.S.

interventions in Latin America, we are addressed by several official speeches reciting the values and accomplishments of the SOA, including a text delivered at what was billed as the closing ceremony of the institution in 2000. But these words are reenacted in such a way as to estrange the basis of the official speech acts they perform through a) a deliberate confusion of first- and third-person pronouns that unsettles the identity of speaker and addressee and b) a hyperbolic manipulation of the temporality and pitch of the speaking voice, variously stretching and concentrating it into a kind of abstract ambient noise that envelops the gallery space as a whole.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Benjamin Genocchio complains that Motta's black-and-white "didacticism" violates the liberal ideal of a "fair and balanced" presentation of information concerning U.S. policy toward Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Yet Genocchio is blind to the systematic violations of human rights tolerated by the United States in the form of Plan Colombia, for instance, an endeavor in which SOA graduates feature prominently, and which directly impacts Motta's native country (not to mention the disastrous consequences of Washington's free-market economic prescriptions for the majority of Latin America's citizens). The point is to identify "the enemy" not as the embodiment of an abstract evil, but as a set of governmental practices deemed intolerable from the perspective of historical memory, human rights, and social justice.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "An Archival Impulse" *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3-22.

<sup>2</sup> "Never Before! Our Amnesiac Torture Debate," *The Nation*, December 26, 2005, [www.thenation.com/doc/20051226/klein](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20051226/klein).

<sup>3</sup> Digitized facsimiles of these materials were made publicly available by George Washington University's National Security Archive in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. See "Prisoner Abuse: Patterns from the Past," [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122).

<sup>4</sup> SOA Watch is the organization that has spearheaded these efforts since 1990. See [www.soawatch.org](http://www.soawatch.org).

<sup>5</sup> "Art Review; Black and White, But Not That Simple," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2006, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04E5D6103FF933A05757C0A9609C8B63>.

<sup>6</sup> On U.S. policy toward Colombia, and the implication of SOA graduates in a number of massacres there over the past decade, see [www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/colombia/](http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/colombia/).