

CARLOS MOTTA

**Letter to My Father
(Standing by the Fence), 2005**

Video, 14'17"

Video, 14'17"

CARLOS MOTTA (Bogotá, Colômbia, 1978. Vive em Nova York, EUA) é um artista multidisciplinar. Seu trabalho se debruça sobre a história política em uma tentativa de criar contranarrativas que contemplem histórias, comunidade e identidades suprimidas. Foi apresentado em âmbito internacional, em espaços como a Tate Modern, Londres; The New Museum, The Guggenheim Museum e MoMA/PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Nova York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Filadélfia; e Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá.

CARLOS MOTTA (Bogotá, Colombia, 1978. Lives in New York, USA) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter-narratives that recognize suppressed histories, communities, and identities. Motta's work has been presented internationally in venues such as Tate Modern, London; The New Museum, The Guggenheim Museum, and MoMA/PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; and Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá.

Almost three minutes before the conclusion of the video *Letter to My Father (Standing by the Fence)*, the artist—in the role of narrator—reveals his intentions to us: “You are witnessing the result of an attempt to map the different currents that flow under my skin.” From the beginning of the video, Motta frequently offers us somewhat generic, imprecise, abstract, or vague images—or mainly focuses on separation fences—that contrast with the simultaneous succession of concrete and specific words and information we see as we watch the video. The voices accompanying the images belong to a group of people whom Motta asked to visit Ground Zero, in New York, and tape their impressions of what they saw. Their commentaries or testimonies bring us to the supposed theme of Motta’s piece, September 11, its effects, its statistics, and the diverse personal experiences of the participants facing the void that had then replaced World Trade Center’s Twin Towers. At the same time, throughout the video, those anonymous voices are joined and juxtaposed with the voice of the narrator. He tries to approach the meaning of the event while recognizing that his connection to it is emotional; it coincided with the physical decline of his sick mother, who eventually succumbed to death a few months after the event.

Motta organizes this 14.17-minute video into twenty segments, most of which are not defined as such; the video flows uninterruptedly, without pause, yet it is punctuated by texts, images, or commentaries that, almost surreptitiously, mark the passage from one segment to the other. Sometimes as personal commentaries, other times as existentially elucidating or biographical monologues, the words and texts that make up the video gradually form a sort of melancholic epistle that is neither intended as a rationalization of the event nor aspires to historicize it. On the one hand, the narrator explains, “I am looking through the window at a confrontation with humanity. This is what we are. We kill, we mourn, we are lost in the order of the world. Some fight back, others litigate for change, some agree, others pray, while we are all prey to institutional manipulation. Humanity has turned against itself. And perhaps our ability to reason is to blame.” On the other hand, he says, “how can one historicize the present when it is still so full of sorrow and unanswered questions?”

Time and time again the only explicit reference that is repeated throughout the video is that of a separation fence. With this image—visually allegoric and textually recurrent—Carlos Motta is not so much setting out to reflect the past of the event or its possible future, but to mark—as if in a letter to his father—a sort of emotional genealogy of the event: “A fence separates; it divides territory. Affected by economic, social, or political interests, land is made accessible to some while

others contemplate their own absence through it. A fence is a source of security, a signifier of power, a monument, a memorial. It indicates that history—no matter on which scale—has taken a turn. This particular fence indicates death, damage, political mismanagement, intolerance, and the most egregious consequence of capitalism: greed. It also justifies, for some, war....” And also: “Once here, I have been faced with the difficulties of being ‘the other.’ I’ve litigated my way with immigration sacrificing interests in favor of a ‘future.’ Borders, belonging, strangeness, accents, my passport, and nationality define my identity and disorder in the ‘first world.’” And once again: “The fence is a malfunctioning universe, which is deemed as the natural course of history.”

Thus, the real theme of Motta’s piece revolves around representation and its limits within the framework of that which is not representable. On the one hand—as we have already suggested in the description of his images—Motta is not interested in representing that which cannot be represented. In any case, the images that he selects reveal an awareness that the manipulative potential of the visually terrifying images that the mainstream media used and repeated over and over again in the days, weeks, and months following the catastrophic event, and that they still use and reproduce on every anniversary of the WTC attack, often depend on their capacity to produce trauma and shock in the viewer, ensuring the political legitimization of the consequent terror through the exploitation of the technological and informative media. So Motta’s video is a counter-narrative and the trauma that the artist assembles through the eyes and words of his collaborators is difficult to represent.

On the other hand, by using the fence/barrier as a recurring element, the artist underscores that which lacks representation, the unrepresentable; the immigrant, the foreigner, “the other” to whom the narrator refers. Again, concentrating on the effects of the attack, sensationalizing the terror to traumatize the viewer—as the media have done—would only have served to distract and shift, once again, attention from the possible causes of those effects, again highlighting the fact that the event was unique, a result of fate, senseless and unrelated to political problems caused by colonialism, oppression, displacement, racism, etc.

I believe that in this letter to his father from the fence, not only does Carlos Motta reflect the contradictions that flow under his skin, but he also places himself on that spatial and temporal gap/barrier between the event and its representation; the same barrier where I suspect that not only does memory preserve the past, it also looks toward what is to come, toward the promise of a barrier-free future.

— OCTAVIO ZAYA

