

**Amnesia and Repression: A Series of Attempts to Establish a
Memory Project of Political Conflict from an Aesthetic Practice
By Carlos Motta**

Originally delivered at arteBA'10's "Bicentennials: After the Invention," a series of talks and discussions programmed by Gabriela Rangel.

Through artistic projects, I seek to reflect on political and historical events with the intention of understanding the effect they have on the formation of subjectivity and on the way in which we live our lives. I have had a particular interest in suggesting alternative perspectives of history, highlighting instances in which the oppressive power constructs or destroys processes of individual or collective memories of conflict and violence.

I will discuss two recent video projects, which attempt to offer a space for the articulation of memory from an aesthetic perspective. I shall base my reflection on the concept of "narrative justice," a notion of justice detached from the judicial field and focused on narrative and communication as pillars of a possible reconciliation. I borrow this term from Columbia University Psychology Professor Jack Saul, who has developed performative workshops with victims of trauma using narration as a means of conflict resolution. I am interested in this idea because it enables me to make use of fictional strategies, documentary video and performance to try to construct spaces for social and political interaction based on the memory of violent and traumatic events.

Before showing you or discussing these works, one of which reflects on a specific scenario of Colombia's political history, I wish to begin with a reflection on what I consider the lack of a culture of memory within the context of the Colombian political conflict, a context to which I am close, and which has been a source of inspiration for the development of my work. It is not my intention to put forward personal ideological stances, but rather to seek resources to discuss conflicting histories.

As I originally sat down to write this lecture back in June 2010, Colombia had just proclaimed Juan Manuel Santos winner of the presidential election. The official candidate of the “U” Party won with almost 70% of the votes. This result came as no surprise to anyone, but at the time it was a great disappointment for me. Santos’ election seemed to me then to reiterate what I consider an obstruction to a possible memory project involving the armed conflict, which has lashed Colombia for sixty years. I thought, given Santos’ critical role as Minister of Defense during Alvaro Uribe’s war-driven government that his mandate would continue to ignore the needs of the countless victims of Colombia’s civil war. Today, my disappointment has turned into expectation, because Santos has successfully pushed for a law, approved by the House of Representatives, the Ley de Víctimas (Victims Law), which is a policy of administrative reparation for victims of forced displacement and other forms of violence. This governmental initiative rooted in the judicial system, represents a huge advancement in fostering a culture of memory in a country where human rights are constantly violated.

The Colombian conflict is far too complex to be described in just a few words, but it may be stated that it is an ideological, economic, and class conflict. It is also a conflict fueled by the production and traffic of illegal substances, and involving guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and the State’s armed forces. It is a conflict of clashing political powers and it is, above all, a persistent, degraded and ongoing conflict. These three characteristics have prevented both a systematized process of the memory of its victims in the social and cultural sphere, and the process of doing justice at the institutional level through the assignment of responsibility to the multiple perpetrators of violence.

How can one think of remembering or commemorating a conflict, which does not come to an end? Conflict situations in countries like Guatemala, South Africa and Argentina, for instance, have demonstrated the way in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, civilian and military trials, and the fostering of a culture of memory from the fields of culture and education have made it possible for memory to be constructed and history written on the basis of revisionist perspectives.

In Colombia's recent history, in addition to the humanitarian tragedy represented by a population of four million people displaced from their lands by the armed actors, there have been a series of specific cases of violation of human rights, of lack of respect for human life, and of political manipulation, which I have found to be particularly revealing. In spite of their having been publicly denounced and their being known to the civilian population, these cases have not been officially tried, nor have the responsibilities been clearly admitted, and consequently, they are open wounds that resist healing. As an example, I would like to mention two events, which at two different moments in history have involved the armed forces of the Colombian State in the violation of human rights. On mentioning these examples I am not seeking to take sides or convey a polarized perspective of the conflict, since the Colombian guerrillas and the other actors in the conflict commit acts, which are equally barbaric. I do so with the intention of emphasizing the imminent fragility and the lack of respect for life in Colombia.

Firstly, the most recent case is that of the so-called "falsos positivos" or "false positives." As a result of the incentives offered by the National Government to the military that produced positive results in the fight against the armed actors, especially against the FARC guerrillas, members of the Colombian army established a macabre practice, which consisted in the assassination of innocent civilians pretending that they were guerrillas killed in combat. These extrajudicial executions caused a political scandal in 2008 and they have begun to be penalized, but their mere existence demands a diligent questioning of the policies of a government during whose administration it was possible to carry out such actions.

Secondly, the systematic extermination of the members of the Patriotic Union, a left-wing political party founded in 1985 as part of a legal political proposal representing several social actors, among them the FARC and the Colombian Communist Party. The party became consolidated independently from the armed struggle; however, 2 presidential candidates, 8 congressmen, 13 deputies, 70 aldermen, 11 mayors, and thousands of militants were assassinated by

paramilitary groups, members of the Colombian State security forces and drug traffickers. Hundreds of its members were displaced inside and outside the country; the majority of these cases have never reached a court of justice; rather, they propagate a silence regime and the fear of freedom of political expression.

These two situations have left thousands of victims seeking legal and social justice. The exiled, the displaced and their families have organized themselves in different ways to remember, denounce and act. But at not finding support from governmental institutions, they remain as minorities whose grief has not been acknowledged, as it deserves to be.

A project of memory of the armed conflict is a social and cultural project, but it is also a justice project. Personally speaking, I consider that Colombia is a country that tends to seek refuge in amnesia, perhaps due to a survival or self-protection drive. In spite of the State's recent initiatives to render the victims visible, in Colombia it is common to forget the past, no matter how many times these images may be repeated before our eyes; to forget those who have been assassinated or forced to disappear is habitual. That is why Colombia has historically tended to be an unfair country that has been indebted to its victims.

In the field of art, attention to the victims has been central in the moving sculptures by artist Doris Salcedo, the paintings of Beatriz González and the work of video artists Juan Manuel Echavarría, Oscar Muñoz, Wilson Díaz or Edwin Sánchez. My intention is to adhere to these efforts and consider the important role of memory as a strategy for social, cultural, and perhaps political reconciliation through art projects.

With the aim of illustrating these ideas, I will present to you two recent projects through which I have attempted to forge a concept and a project involving a memory of conflict that is detached from the judicial sphere and aligns with an aesthetic practice. In this case the term 'aesthetic' implies an ambit that is extra-official, artistic, and ephemeral; of a historical character and based on narrative, representation, fiction, and communication among citizens: a narrative justice.

“Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice” is a series of six performance acts which took place in March 2010 in several public squares in Bogotá during the campaign for the presidential election. Six actors read historical political speeches originally delivered by six presidential candidates who were assassinated because of their political ideas: Rafael Uribe Uribe (assassinated in 1914), Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (a.1948), Jaime Pardo Leal (a.1987), Luis Carlos Galán (a.1989), Carlos Pizarro (a.1990) and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa (a.1990). All the speeches emphatically stress the need to envisage peace as the primordial element for the rectification of social inequality in Colombia. The actors represent a variety of Colombian identities: they are citizens with different social and ethnic origins.

These actions constituted interventions in the framework of everyday life, aimed at repeating, emphasizing and recalling the same words of denouncement that cost these political leaders their lives. And they sought, through performance and fiction, to go back to important historical moments of the conflict with the wish of generating encounters among the passers-by/audience, which might make it possible to reconsider the value of those ideas that were chastised. Through this work, I was interested in approaching history from the perspective of “documentary fiction.” In this case, fiction enables me to forge a space for memory mediated by artistic strategies.

A couple of months after performing these actions, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa and Carlos Pizarro León Gómez’s original campaign posters, dated 1990, began to appear in the streets of Bogotá during the presidential campaign. The two candidates were assassinated during the 1990 presidential campaign. Both represented left-wing ideologies: Jaramillo was the official candidate of the Patriotic Union Party, and Pizarro, for his part, had been the leader of the 19th of April (Revolutionary) Movement, a guerrilla group that lay down their weapons and became consolidated as a political party.

I do not know who the authors of these interventions were, but I sympathize with this action, since few are the voices of resistance and opposition featuring a discourse of respect for life and inclusion that have had a place in Colombia’s

political culture. The posters alluding to the assassinated candidates fulfilled their function of highlighting the absence of a discourse of opposition and social rectification based on the field of representation.

The second project I would like to mention is the video “Resistance and Repression” (2010), a collaboration with Josué Euceda, a medical student in Tegucigalpa who witnessed several acts of repression against demonstrators in a march of the resistance movement against the coup d’état in Honduras.

Josué has an articulated political discourse and he wished to share his experiences and ideas with me with the purpose of narrating the brutal abuse of citizens by the police authorities. Together we wrote a narrative based on his personal experience. The video features Josué, telling me via Skype from his home in Tegucigalpa the story of the beatings he witnessed and of the desire for survival of a resistance movement. From an aesthetic and conceptual point of view, we wanted to make reference to the decentralized journalism of blogs, which has made it possible to have access to extra-official version on events of this kind.

This video is also a reflection on media representation and in particular on photography as an informational and political tool. The video contrasts Josue’s testimony with a photograph taken by him of a victim of police brutality. These two modes of representation are intentionally exposed: Who is shooting? Who is being shot? Who is looking? What are the multidirectional relations at stake within that triangular relationship? The ethical and aesthetic challenges posed by these questions demand the breaking down of subject positions and reveal the hierarchical way that we have traditionally learned to think of representation: that an image “of” something is made “for” someone’s (uncritical) consumption. Shifting and turning around this one-way relation to highlight the responsibility of the viewer to the subject and the maker, the maker to the subject, and the subject to the viewer can lead one to productively consider the political challenges of representation. When we stop favoring the viewer and implicate him/her we confront social clashes, which are often

irreconcilable yet offer opportunities to think through “antagonism” and “difference” ethically, aesthetically, and politically.

Similarly to “Six Acts,” “Resistance and Repression” also intends to present an alternative narrative that considers the importance of human life, the role of citizens, and a plural understanding of the concept of democracy. In a similar way to Colombia, Honduras seeks the resolution of a polarizing conflict. Likewise, it is the people of Honduras’s endeavor to give testimony; disseminate and narrate with the intention of changing history, in order to be able to reconcile themselves with the forces of oppression.

To conclude, I would like to echo the last words of the introduction to the Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez’s book, “Guerras, memoria e historia” (“Wars, Memory and History”), which read: “In order to give a meaning to my work as a whole, I have chosen the duo Memory (individual and collective) and History (actual evolution of a process) or if you will, subjectivity and discursive rationality. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct their multiple connections, interweaving my closest personal experiences of contemporary war and those which are beyond my personal memory, in the civil wars inscribed as social periods in the history of Colombia, and the political-cultural context that it has fallen to my lot to live.”