"Art and Mass Violence. An Interview with Juan Manuel Echevarria (exhaustive version)"

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Abstract
"What I’m interested in, today, through my photography, is to be able to get away from this bubble, the four walls of my studio in Bogota. It’s going to the Colombian countryside, subject for a long time of the most unimaginable violence. It’s to know and dive deeper into that brutal reality, which we don’t want to look at. It’s listening to our farmers’ stories, which are a source of major education on the reality of the war. Bogota is the capital of indifference: here, it is not in our interests to look beyond. There is so much repetition in the news given by the media, in images and graphics, that violence has become our ‘daily bread’; and this annihilates us. Nevertheless, I also believe that not wanting to look beyond our urban boarders is a way to protect oneself through a defensive mechanism. This enables people to remain in their “comfort zone”. A poem from W.H. Auden Musée de Beaux Arts, in which he reflects upon a painting from Brueghel called The Icarus Fa...


Référence bibliographique

ART AND MASS VIOLENCE.
A DIALOGUE WITH JUAN-MANUEL ECHAVARRIA

by Matthieu de Nanteuil (CRIDIS/UCL)

— An interview made in May 2010, published in May 2012¹ —

The work of Juan Manuel Echevarria is multiple. He used to be a writer; he is now a famous photographer, linking to his photographic composition an intensive narrative. It is therefore a certain conception of “art” which is tackled in this article – an artistic practice hatched with curiosity, visited places, encounters, but also and primarily, with tales. This multiplicity has allowed the artist to take risks. First, there were – as an opening gesture – the photos of those dummies, with absent body parts and mutilated faces. How would it be possible to separate them from the observation that “the pedestrians touched their dresses, brushed their clothes, but never looked at the bodies?” Later on, came a video where broken faces were seen – witnesses of the massacre that took away their family members at a village in Choco –, singing their pain and hope, “because only singing allows us to say what words are unable to say”. “There were those graves of Puerto Berrio, coloured walls brought up naked in the wind of absurdity, through which comes out a different world – a mix of political resistance and popular rituals, a silent place of moral greatness. More recently, there was that risk, almost vertigo: to ask some ex-fighters to draw what their eyes saw, what their hands did, what their bodies and minds coldly destroyed. The aim was not to drown them in an unbearable impunity, but to situate the whole artistic process on the extreme edge of human discourse: to ask the actors of war to be the gravediggers of their own oblivion, to reintegrate them inside the chain of social responsibilities, and to reject all alibi.

¹ Translated by Angela Maria Ocampo, edited by Angela Maria Ocampo, Alexandra Woelfle and Matthieu de Nanteuil.
We did we not know? Yes, their hands knew – and those hands do not mislead. Painting hands are also killing hands: this is the “place without place” of an art which does not accept the illusions of propaganda, and of time that passes by. Indeed, how is it to deny the evidence in front of those paintings in which we find, in the fugacity of a gesture, Daumier, Pizarro and Gauguin? The artist’s word emerges here like a persistent murmur: “They accepted to paint while being anonymous. Many of them are illiterate. Their paintings are worth all discourses. There, we can observe the logics of war: a schizophrenic world – from one side of the river to the other, a soccer stadium and the scene of massacre –, the law of the strongest, the macabre theatrical performance, and the micro-stories which compose the great History.” Anna Tiscornia, who received in Medellin the exhibition La guerra que no hemos visto, had without any doubt, the most justified expression: “Above all, this exhibition forces the rhetoric of oblivion to stagger”. Art: a fragment of reality that we refuse to look at, made of constantly repeated work, unfinished gestures, extreme tensions within the limits of what can be said. Such art avoids the every-day routine and leads us to the interior of day-to-day reality.

In filigree, what is elaborated here is a specific relationship between art and violence. Clearly, art does not exist without having a critical function: in numerous ways, it denounces violence, especially when the latter has become a system. However, its message is at the same time deeper and more modest than denunciation: it operates a mutation within the field of discourse. Art’s language is not only a denouncing language. It does not say what is true: it works as a stronghold against all lies. It does not indicate with a metronome’s precision the responsibility of a certain actor, or of a certain institution: it talks about the complicity between actors and violence, it recalls us the porosity of institutions in front of massive crimes. It reminds people that a society, whose foundations rest on criminal industry, is a worm-eaten society from the inside. Society... but which society? In times of globalization, when Colombia is in the midst of increasing international economic exchanges — and not only because of the drugs trade —, should we only talk about the Colombian society? Where does the drug go, if it’s not first to the West? Where do all the reviews about systematic human rights violation circulate, if it’s not in major press agencies, international institutions and other high diplomatic ranks? Who uses the resources of the Colombian subsoil, who provides the country with ultra-sophisticated technologies, who buys Colombian exports, if it’s not those privileged partners, namely Europe and the United States? When the world has supposedly become a “global village”, the idea of an “exotic country” which would be a carrier, on its own, of repeated violence is just unjustifiable. Colombia represents a specific, yet not exceptional, part of the intimate relationship that our modern world holds with the idea of humanity — or, to be precise, with the idea of its negation. Robert Antelme, Vasili Grossman, Germaine Tillon, Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, and many others, do know.

Irreplaceable role of art: to transmit a regime of complicity, beyond any explanation. To highlight constant comes and goes between the “daily” and the “exceptional”, the “normal” and the “pathologic”. More precisely: to knock down boundaries. Opposing the leaded cloak of dumbness, this art underlines the plurality of aesthetic forms, the sharpness of popular testimony, the concrete experience of war and survivorship. Here again, the challenge is how narrative accompanies a diverse artistic practice. The matter is not to juxtapose discourses, but to authorize a word which reminds us with the material anchorage of the artistic gesture. “In that place, I met this or that person, and this or that idea was born...” The subjective word of the artist prohibits the “art for the sake of art”, and culminates in a new narrative regime: it highlights the unachieved part of the artistic act, its insertion in the world it represents and from which it’s impossible to abstract. There, a global language emerges: a word and a gesture kept in suspense as if on the edge of a contemporary abyss, which – at the same time – they illuminate. A word
without certainty, but which finds its strength in the ability to talk to everyone, articulating the artist's subjectivity with that of each one of us. A specific gesture, which opens the door to what inhabits its most intimate being: the will to exhume the real, to bring up to light the mounts of indifference and fright that maintain society in the logics of war. Through the artistic act, the real returns in narration, the Agora is reconstructed around and from the acknowledgement of mass assassination – and not from its denegation. As a whole, a particular language comes out, able to implant itself in society's most hidden places; an elaborated language, able to habit and be inhabited by all ordinary citizens.

Let us add an essential point: such language has nothing of supposedly “neutral”. It does not avoid rational analysis nor ethics, to which art can and must be articulated, like any other human activity. On the contrary, because of its own diversity, the work of Juan Manuel Echavarria asks for such a framework to be pointed out – this is evidenced by the interview that follows. The hierarchy of responsibilities, the critical analysis of domination relationships, the capacity to escape from the general confusion of roles, maintained by all those who have their interests in war, are other possible extensions of his work. However, this art makes necessary to reformulate some fundamental aspects of such problems: the identification of causes cannot go along the ignorance of facts; and ethics cannot be left aside from a reflection on “the visible” – something that allows a society to see or not to see, to open or close the process of acknowledging the other. There is an anthropologic prerequisite which cannot be hidden, and that artistic practices in general – and this one in particular – put forward.

To see, to know... Without any doubt, this duality is located at the centre of any artistic composition. Without any doubt, art has, as its first function, the ambition to reincorporate mankind in its original elemental humus, transforming its senses into something more than mere organs: as the possible vehicle of our humanity – instead of letting them in the midst of “occupation” or “entertainment”. However, these elements get a particular impact when, withdrawing from any reduction to a discourse that would decide of their final meaning, they arise in the centre of a society in war. There, the artistic work does not only indicate an abstract and foreign violence with a finger; it is the finger, the one to whom it belongs or to whom it is destined. Faced with the Medusa who would petrify its prey, faced to the violence that, with its abomination, would paralyze those it is directed to, this composition reminds us... that Medusa has a human face. In Colombia and elsewhere.

AN ARTISTIC PATH: AFTER WRITING, THE LEARNING OF A “PARTICULAR VIEW”

MdN: How would you summarize, nowadays, the essential of your career?

JME: What I'm interested in, today, through my photography, is to be able to get away from this bubble, the four walls of my studio in Bogota. It's going to the Colombian countryside, subject for a long time of the most unimaginable violence. It's to know and dive deeper into that brutal reality, which we don't want to look at. It's listening to our farmers' stories, which are a source of major education on the reality of the war. Bogota is the capital of indifference: here, it is not in our interests to look beyond. There is so much repetition in the news given by the media, in images and graphics, that violence has become our “daily bread”; and this annihilates us. Nevertheless, I also believe that not wanting to look beyond our urban boarders is a way to protect oneself through a defensive mechanism. This enables people to remain in their “comfort zone”. A poem from W.H. Auden “Musee de Beaux Arts”, in which he reflects upon a painting
from Brueghel called *The Icarus Fall*, talks about this precise mechanism: not wanting to go further as a way to escape political or ethical engagement. To a great extent, this poem inspired me in 2006 to make a series of six photos called *Monumentos*. In this series, I tried to depict indifference, which is one of the forces which supports the perpetuation of violence, to which we got used to for so many years in Colombia.

**But how did all of this start? As far as I understood, writing was your first artistic activity? Do you believe more in the power of images than in the power of words?**

I was born in 1947, and I don’t believe that there has even a year of peace since this date, including during the “Frente Nacional” which, according to the French sociologist, Daniel Pecaut, was a period of a “latent” violence. A painting from Alejandro Obregon of 1962, called *La Violencia*, depicts a dead pregnant woman, with her bulging stomach. The latter seems to announce the containment of a violence… which is about to explode. Colombia is a country whose history has been marked, during the 20th century, by sixty years of war. In my case, it’s the relationship between indifferent pedestrians and dummies’ broken faces which made me wake up, and get away from the anaesthesia I had been living with. This gave birth to *Retratos*, a series that showed me the path I had to follow if I wanted to explore violence through photography. My third book *Emilia O.*, that was never published, was the story of an aristocratic woman and her indifference towards war. There was something then, there was a start, but I did not feel it as strong enough. I still have to answer your question...

When I was 11 years old, I was sent to the United States to a boarding school. My education was for its most part carried out there: I studied Literature, Art history and Humanities. The language I used was mostly English. During those years, I lost my mother tongue, and when I returned to Colombia, I could not speak Spanish fluently any longer. I realized at this moment that my original language was fragmented; even reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez was difficult! I always had a particular sensibility for the Arts, so I decided to write, I had about 22 or 23 years old, and I did this because I felt the need to recover my language. I wrote my first book, *La gran catarata*, with the help of etymologic dictionaries in Spanish; it took me eight years to accomplish this book. Yet, during this time I was able to dive at the core of this language, and such an experience nearly became a transcendental one. At 49 years old, however, I found out that I could not continue writing, that even words were telling me “Leave! You don’t have any more time to write”. Therefore, I went to see some famous artists, friends of mine, Liliana Porter and Ana Tiscornia, and they gave me advice: “Take a camera”. When I explained to them that I was at the edge of a precipice, they pushed me to the abyss.

One day, in 1995, I went with my camera to Veinte de Julio, a neighbourhood at the south of Bogota, where there is a building called the “Temple of the Divine Child”, a place of great pilgrimage. I had never been there and, passing by a great avenue, very broad in size along very

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2 The « Frente Nacional » is the result of an agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties. The decision was that, throughout a period of 16 years, access to Republican Presidency would be equally shared, so that each party would have a similar number of delegates in the National Congress.
broad sidewalks, I saw two or three streets of clothing shops. Outside each shop, there were
several dummies, used to exhibit clothes, but their faces were broken, their bodies incomplete or
mutilated – many did not have eyes, nor noses, they looked like civil victims of a war. There, I
took my first black and white series on such dummies. I went back there on repeated occasions,
yet the most important is that, from the first time, I saw people passing by, taking a look at the
clothes, touching the dresses, but never stopping to look at the broken faces. On that very
moment, I recognized myself as one of them and I said: “That person is also me; I have not seen
the violence we live in, here in Colombia. I never wanted to acknowledge the fact that it does
exist”. Looking at my first series, called Retratos, I thought that my photography should explore
the violence in this country. Five or six years later, when I started to construct videos, I went
back to that place: I wanted to film the indifference of anonymous pedestrians who were making
such mutilated faces invisible. When I returned to the same avenue, I found that there were no
more shops: the scene had disappeared.

What did you do then?

Then came a series of 32 photos called Corte de florero. I constructed some flowers with human
bones, obtained with the help of some doctors. I photographed them, my inspiration being
drawn by documents coming out from the Muis Botanical Expedition. In 1783, this expedition
allowed the “Spirit of Enlightenment” to come into the Nuevo Reino de Granada (Colombia
today). What seems to me quite interesting about Corte de florero is that, during the fifties – i.e.
during the civil war between liberals and conservatives in the countryside –, there were
transgressions made to the bodies. These transgressions were called “cortes” or cuts: “corte de
corbata”, “corte de mica”… And I, as a child living in Medellin, grew up listening to these stories.
The “corte de corbata” was a transgression where the perpetrator opened a whole on the throat
of the cadaver and pulled its tongue out from it; the “corte de mica” figured a decapitated body,
whose head was lying on the stomach or between the legs. During the fifties, there was a sort of a
new “writing”, a new composition of bodies through these macabre “cuts”. You find photos that
put some light on the “corte de corbata”, or on the “corte de mica”, but none of the “corte de
florero”. This one consisted in cutting the head and extremities of the victim, and in introducing
the arms and legs in his or her chest, in the form of a flowerpot. According to my opinion, the
farmers had given the names. I believed I heard about this through the radio, since during my
childhood I had no television.

Was this in any way “transmitted” by your family history?

I am convinced that my parents discussed the brutality of these practices, as well as the domestic
service. Parts of such events must have got trapped in my unconscious, so that when I read the
book Matar, rematar y contramatar, written by an anthropologist, Maria Victoria Uribe, where she
talks about these practices in the Tolima region, my childhood memory flourished, and pushed
me to create Corte de florero. It may be possible that these stories were too abstract for my early
age, but something must have been trapped in my imagination, otherwise I would not have
created these “Flowers of evil”. There is another image, or another word, which emerged during
the fifties, in which my imagination was also trapped: “aplanchar”, which means “to iron”, but also “to flatten”. I heard – and this, I think, from the radio – that, in a village where liberals and conservatives entered, they “flattened” their enemies. It seems that a crowd of men with the flat part of the machete hit their adversaries. This is the origin of the word “aplanchar”. Yet, I could not understand it at this time. I remember that, when I was going to the room service and saw our maid ironing, I imagined that this was the way they fought each other. It was a very visual image. Now, such a remembrance comes back to my memory for the first time: the pants and shirts the maid ironed, did they represent a person to me, during my childhood?

After this episode, it seems that you dived completely into your artistic work, with the necessity to undertake a long work on image, on the visible, on the senses which are anterior to writing...

This was only the beginning of my photographic work. I understood that my strength was in the image; through it, I could create symbols and metaphors. As an artist, I’m intrinsically interested in metaphors. I learned to use image in literature and then in photography, which, to my opinion, is essentially a visual art. This is the reason for what comes next, La bandeja de Bolivar. This composition was born from the indignation I felt with Ernesto Samper’s government, when he denied the fact that drug trafficking had entered his campaign and never renounced to his presidency – nor Congress made him leave. In the end, it was a terrible political problem, where those in power laughed directly at every Colombian’s faces. My brother, Andrés, had by chance been offered a tray, from a Bolivar’s porcelain ware, at an antiquary in Bogota. It was decorated with delicate roses and has an inscription on it: “Republica de Colombia para siempre”. It was therefore a commemorative piece, symbolising the dream of Colombia as a Republic. My brother gave it to me as a gift. On that moment of indignation, I said: “I want to break this tray”. The idea then came up, a series of 10 photos. The first one is a photo of the tray, intact, which then breaks slowly until it ends up transformed into a small white tumult. After on, I made a video with those 10 pictures and added sound; you never see a hand breaking this tray, you only see the plate in disintegration and pulverization until it finally becomes a mount of dust, almost taking the form of cocaine powder. In the 21st century, the country is still at war, and the lucrative sources of drug trafficking have penetrated almost all institutions in the country.

Later on came La Maria, a project with seven professional women who were kidnapped at the church La Maria in Cali (2000). It was a massive kidnapping. The Popular Liberation Army (ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional) came into the church, divided the crowd in groups to be able to manage the situation, and kidnapped many people. Among them, seven women. The worst part is that, when the kidnapping is not done for political but for economic reasons – which is the case for most of the kidnappings in Colombia, including this one – you are used as an object, as a commodity, with only one buyer: your family. This is the type dehumanization a person suffers when kidnapped. These women allowed me to photograph what they brought from the mountains and to film each one of their stories, very painful indeed, with episodes of extreme tension between them, and also with many deep and profound poetic moments.
Their captivity lasted five months, which they dedicated to invent survivorship strategies, for example searching for insects and collecting them. This activity became important for them, as they showed their collection to their kidnappers – they even would go through the jungle to find other insects in order to complete the collection, which is quite unbelievable. Thus, a bridge of communication was created between the guerrillas and their victims. I believe one of the most important things is to create and maintain communication between captors and captives. They made a collection of various insects; they also said they saw extraordinary landscapes and rivers, with coloured bottoms which made the waters look golden, red and green. From there, they extracted rocks to which they gave names or surnames, and constructed figures of their relatives. I think in this activity was full of hope; doing so, they thought that a small rock would be a gift, perhaps a souvenir, for that beloved person, and it became a reality. They brought back those rocks to their family and friends. I also believe that these objects acted as a resistance symbols to oblivion. Finally, those rocks and insects are witnesses of the moments they lived during their captivity.

Another example. They say that becoming a unified group was difficult because they had to sleep in very reduced spaces – in “cambuches”. A “cambuche” is a small tent; it does not have any mattress nor pillow. For eleven people – there were eleven people in total –, to move or turn around during the night, sharing that small and narrow space, was very difficult. So conflicts started to arise. In the beginning, they fought constantly, but then came a moment when they understood that they were not going anywhere without unity. They told me a beautiful tale. They developed a sound, a scream they called “El rugido del león” – the lion’s roar. When one of the group members was freed, the rest came together in a circle, they hugged each other and as the person drew away, they roared like a lion in order for that person to take away with him/her all their love, all their voices. These are very moving stories, dramatic and difficult ones. However, these women had the courage and the intelligence to understand that they had to act as a creative group if they wanted to survive. They even created very imaginative plays. They said: “Well, what are we going to do tonight? Let’s imagine we are going to a restaurant, the most exquisite we can imagine. You Melitza, what would take for dinner tonight?” They performed their fantasies, they even could laugh. They remained very creative despite their condition...

La María also set up a very important dimension of my artistic process. I documented their voices telling me their story; it coexisted with a visual composition, whereby their insects had been photographed – as in in Bocas de Ceniza, where we can see a combination of visual and oral art. La María was very important as it gave birth to something which would grow up many years later: the painting workshops with the ex-fighters. I asked Melitza, who had been an art teacher (she was the one who initiated pictures on rocks, during the captivity period), if she was afraid of being killed, and she told me: “No, not really because within the people who kidnapped us, there were children, children as old as mines”. At that moment, I realized that it would also be crucial to know the other side of the story. La María has been presented very few times, only in the Museo de la Tertulia in Cali a few years back. It is a beautiful visual composition.
The seven women came during a weekend to Bogota and I had the opportunity to discuss with them, getting to know them before being able to photograph their objects. It was fascinating, since the insects they brought were stored in old small boxes, given by the guerrillas, so that they could put the animals safely somewhere, and carry them through the jungle. Therefore, for the women, these photos were very important. Of each of the several species they brought, there were two, five, even eight pieces, with the exception of a large white tailed cockroach of which they brought eleven pieces – exactly the number they were, knowing that the group was made of seven women, and four men. There, I said, I have to put these insects in one box. They were able to fit in, but it was very tight for them to be all together, just as it was for the victims, who had been pushed together in a “cambuche”, forced to live in uncomfortable positions. In a certain way, they were reflected themselves in that insect collection. When I have these insects in mind, I cannot but think about the Metamorphosis of Kafka: at the end, these women were transformed in objects, in commodities, just like Kafka’s character, Gregorio, is transformed in an insect. When I showed them the picture of the eleven insects put in the box, Melitza and Rossana immediately said: “This is us”. At that moment, they recognized themselves as being these insects… before returning to their human condition.

I would like to stop a moment on this point. Without any doubt, something within your artistic work has to do with the theme of “awareness”. Your work deeply disturbs the ordinary representations of the war, within the Colombian society. In addition, there is a lot more in this work than just “images”: one can find orality, hearing experiences or stories in it. As it is the case for the painting workshops with the ex-fighters, which in the end gave birth to La guerra que no hemos visto. Narrative continuously comes up in the way you expose your work and thus, in your creation as such. We have to listen to the stories you tell us about the different pictures –what the relationships between victims were made of, what the ex-fighters said about the experience of war, what is the scene he or she tried to paint made of, and so on – to understand the exact meaning of your aesthetic approach. It seems that you consider that art requires a… non artistic word.

Indeed, behind my images there is always a word. This must be the legacy of my writing.

From this point of view, you do not only open the door on a world of obscure images and fantasies; you also open a window on reality, a reality that we are not able to look at any longer.

This has been part of my process; it did not exist in my literature. My literature was mainly evocative; I did not want to go into realities – economic, social, political, nothing of that sort. I wanted to look in the other direction, and to avoid the reality of this country. Whereas, from the moment I started to take pictures, I started to read Colombia’s history, as well as other countries’ histories, especially those that had gone through very difficult periods. Photography took me back to reflection and research.

This, then, triggers you to go back to writing, but through an unexpected path...

It is correct. This forced me to go back to orality. I had to listen to histories of those who had lived violence in their own flesh.
I was in a village called Baru, at the beginning of 2003. One night, we were having some beers, when suddenly came a guy. He sat down as well, and said: “I have a song, do you want to hear it? I wrote it myself.” Then, of course, we listened. It was a song where he thanked God to have saved him from a massacre. I then realized how Dorismel – the singer – had transformed his most profound pain into a song. I talked to him and asked him whether he would allow me to film him singing. Then, when I returned to Bogota to listen to his song once again, it moved me completely. I said to myself “Where else could I find similar experiences? This cannot be an isolated phenomenon; in Colombia there must be many victims who have transformed their pain into songs”. Some months later I saw President Pastrana on TV, visiting a village called Bellavista, in Bojaya, where a massacre had occurred within a church on the 2nd may 2002. In this same newsflash, two seconds later, came an image of two youngsters singing on the massacre. There I found Noel and Vicente. They had written a song on the horror they witnessed in their village. They gave me what then turned into Bocas de Ceniza. I called them: they allowed me to film them singing “a cappella”, and they took me to other singers in the region. This village is next to the Atrato River, in Choco. This is a very strategic passage for the arms trade when entering the pacific coast; it is also an exit route for drug trade. There has always been conflict in this region, between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and armed forces supporting paramilitaries’ actions. The paramilitaries had taken over the village of Bellavista, as well as another close village, called Vigia del Fuerte. The guerrilla came to expulse them from the area; there was a great battle and the inhabitants used the church as a shelter. The guerrilla launched a gas cylinder – a weapon often characteristic of the FARC –, which landed on the roof of the church. There were about 79 dead victims. I have been several times to Bellavista and Vigia del Fuerte for the commemoration which takes place every year. In Afrocolombian culture, cemeteries have no meaning; these communities preserve memory through their chants. I now know more than ten people who have made songs on this tragedy and on the horror that the population experienced at that moment.

Who were the armed actors involved in this massacre?

All of them were responsible: the paramilitaries and the FARC were fighting for this strategic corridor, they were in combat, and the Colombian army allowed the paramilitaries to cross the Atrato River. In the end, it is a weapon from the FARC that killed many innocent people and in a brutal way. Domingo, one of the singers in Bocas de Ceniza, was one of the persons to recover the bodies. His descriptions are unimaginable. Nevertheless, when I asked Luzmila, another singer from Bocas de Ceniza, to tell me about the violence that she had lived in her village, Jurado, also deeply affected by war, she told me that she was incapable to describe it with words. This really caught my attention: it made me think that the transformation generated by art is what allows us to see horror, without paralyzing ourselves. In the exhibition, La guerra que no hemos visto at the Museo de Antioquia, organized by Ana Tisconia, I remember that in front of a picture of an ex-fighter, where he represents a massacre, the curator of this Museum, Conrado Uribe, told me that
Art is like Perseus’ shield, through which we can see the Medusa’s face. Let’s not forget that, in this Greek myth, looking at the Medusa face-to-face would petrify anyone.

Art, as a resistance to petrification. What do you mean by this?

I would like to insist on the theme of how art enables us to see horror. Let’s think about Goya. In one of his works, among the series Los desastres de la guerra, he shows us a massacre of civilians, with the inscription “No se puede mirar”³. Is Goya telling us: “Through my art, you can see”? I can also mention the work of a French artist, Jacques Callot, made in 1633, which he called Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre⁴. The same happens with the painting from a Colombian ex-fighter, who, in 2009, represented the torture of a man hung from a tree⁵. All these images confront me to horror, but all of them allow me to look at them, and think. What catches my attention is that, even if, more or less, two hundred years separate this war from the one mentioned by Callot, both events are structured by a common guiding principle: the dehumanization of human beings, with its repeated and unimaginable cruelty.

I shall take the opportunity to say something that comes to me when listening to you. Firstly, I think there is a profound gesture of “decentralization” within your artwork. It consists in “going and seeing”, working in the places in which violence concretely occurred, and in those places where people did resist to that violence. But, there is more. Behind this balance of “seeing” vs. “not seeing”, hides a certain way of practising vision: the learning of what could be called “an indirect vision”. Your work is about organizing this particular vision, without necessarily appealing to voyeurism or worse, pornography. Since, of course, there is also a possible pornographic vision of violence, which takes the observer into the vortices of an organic show, and forces him/her to look at mutilated bodies in details. This argument leads us to evoke what, in the West, is becoming a real challenge when dealing with such topics, especially in the area of journalism: the monopoly of vision or, more precisely, the predominance of “seeing” when coming to the use of our senses. This monopoly often favours one sense to the detriment of others. It tends to show how, within an anthropological perspective, the development of instrumental rationality has organized a very narrow-minded type of sensitive relationship with the social world. What is denied is the pluralism of sensorial receptivity, with all the aesthetics consequences it has – a pluralism which, on the contrary, stands at the heart of non-Western countries. In a way, your work contributes to the development of such pluralism. By combining the visible and the invisible, including through hesitation, your aesthetic research avoids the traps of the almighty power of “vision”. Thus, it confronts vision to its original role: to look at, as a global gesture. To see, to listen, to feel, to live…

I fully agree. Just as I was telling you: in Bojaya, where there was that massacre inside the church, the cemetery had very little meaning, as opposed to Puerto Berrio. The important thing in Bojaya was orality. In Afrocolombian cultures, orality is fundamental. Every time I go to the commemorations, I find myself with another person who also has written a song on the horror

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³ « No se puede mirar/It should not be looked at » belongs to a series of 82 paintings that the Spanish painter, Francisco de Goya, made between 1810 et 1815. These paintings were dealing with the so-called Spanish Independent War, which occurred in 1808. In them, the painter gives details of victims of shootings.

⁴ Linked to the 30 years war.

⁵ Presented in the exhibition La guerra que no hemos visto.
of that day. It is through chants, and oral transmission in general, that this community keeps its memory.

IN BETWEEN RITUALS AND RESISTANCE, AN AESTHETIC INTERPRETATION OF POPULAR EXPERIENCE: “LAS TUMBAS DE PUERTO BERRIO”

We now get to what seems to be one of your major artworks, Las Tumbas de Puerto Berrio. This composition gave birth to numerous exhibitions, especially Requiem NN, in the Galería Sextante of Bogota at the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010. This piece was also presented at the Casa de la Cultura de Puerto Berrio, in November 2010.

I finished Bocas de Ceniza at the beginning of 2004, and then I had a period of silence that lasted about a year and a half, until I was visited by Laurel Reuter, who leads a museum at Grand Forks in North Dakota – USA. She was preparing the exhibition called The Disappeared; so I composed a series of photos called NN, which were presented there. It was then that I started to think about the missing people or reported “disappeared”, a very marginal theme in Colombia at that time. Now, forced disappearance arose quite early in Colombian history. In the violence of the fifties, the victims’ bodies were thrown to rivers; the paintings made by the ex-fighters show such situations in several cases. The State, as you say, has a great responsibility in that sort of issue. This is case for eleven people reported missing during the Toma del Palacio de Justicia, or for the assassinations of civilians by professional soldiers, known as “falsos positivos”. The complicity of the State’s forces in many of the massacres committed by paramilitaries has been something quite disturbing to me. During the workshops, some ex-paramilitaries told me that they called members of the army, “cousins”. This, I believe, I will never forget.

Such direct contribution of the government to the destruction of society is not only intrinsic to Colombia. This is to be found in all cases in which we observe an authoritarian and/or totalitarian configuration of the political system. Its permanence is due to the blockage of society (of its autonomy, of its aspirations, etc.). However, the practice of forced disappearance at a large scale, as in this country, can be explained by specific aspects, that have to do with Colombian history. Two of these aspects must be mentioned.

The first one is due to the fact that forced disappearance belongs to a group of specific violations. For this reason, it responds to certain functional obligations: among others, the one consisting in brutally withdrawing ordinary people from the community, in breaking the public dimension of each singular existence, thus deconstructing the basis of what Hannah Arendt called the appearance. To her, the appearance forms the essence of the polis, i.e. the possibility given to a living community to act collectively through the respect due to each of its members. In the appearance, every citizen participates to the constitution of a “public space”, defined as space of

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6 The Disappeared (Los Desaparecidos) was an exhibition gathering 27 Latin-American artists, in the North Dakota Museum of Art, coming from countries where civil wars – or dictatorships – have produced kidnapping, torture, or civil assassinations. These acts have been achieved by States agents or paramilitaries.

7 « False positives » is the name given to innocent civilians, assassinated by members of the Colombian army, the latter trying to make them considered as members of the guerrillas, dead while fighting. This way, members of the army have been able to “perform” in their fight against “subversion”, to show quantitative results. Such a practice has considerably increased under the “democratic security” policy, decided under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez.
communication which gathers a diversity of unique persons. In such perspective, political acting should abandon its position of sovereignty to define itself through mutual encounters, guided by common sense. Forced disappearance therefore intends to destroy the philosophical roots of democracy. It is different from homicides or forced displacement focused on territorial occupation (mainly practiced by paramilitary groups), also different from attacks that seek to destroy army equipment or government structures (mainly practiced by guerrillas). It is true that there is a great integration between all types of violence, yet these functional differences must be mentioned. However, forced disappearance is by itself the expression of sovereignty in the field of violence.

A second aspect can be added. Forced disappearance, essentially practiced by army forces, with the complicity of paramilitary groups... cannot be seen. It does not only aim at making people disappear, but also intends to dilute the chain of responsibilities. Thus, it allows the State of law to be preserved from any accusation of complicity towards possible “violations of rights”. It protects both the State as institution, and its legal foundation. In other terms, it constitutes an essential mechanism for the perpetuation of State’s violence – even though recent legal advances, limiting such violence, have been taken, thanks to the strengthening of International Penal Law. That’s why, your work is crucial. It’s a crucial political act, in the arendtian sense of it. However, let’s go back to Puerto Berrio...

I read about the tombs of the NN on the newspaper El Tiempo. NN – Ningún Nombre are the initials given to dead people who have not been identified. After reading the article, I thought that I should go and visit Puerto Berrio, a medium sized city of about 50 thousand inhabitants, situated on the banks of the Magdalena River – one of the principal rivers bathing Colombia. Puerto Berrio region is known as the Medium Magdalena Region; it has been affected continuously by armed actors – guerrillas, paramilitarism and members of the army collaborating with the paramilitaries. My two previous artworks – the photography series NN and Monumentos – had already raised my own awareness of the theme of forced disappearance. In other words, it is my path, my work-in-progress, which gave me the impulse to travel and visit this region. I arrived knowing absolutely nobody, and four years later, I know many stories from many people. I realized then that the victims had a strong need to talk, to express themselves and to be listened to. In Puerto Berrio, I have good friends. The article referred to the miraculous tombs of NN, to the ritual of asking “favours” to the dead who had been rescued, most from the river, and who were given burial at the cemetery.

So, the article insisted on the ritual aspects, highlighting the “calculations” people made to get “favours” from the dead. It did not mention the symbolic or the political dimension of such practice...

I don’t remember that the article talked about that. When I arrived the first time, I saw something astonishing. The cemetery was open at midnight during the whole month of November, and a man called the “Animero” – a sort of spiritual guide, not a priest – led a procession. He dressed black, carried a bell and prayed while walking. Behind him, several people followed and knocked at the tombs in order to call the “animas” or souls. Then, I understood that the ritual must have been very old, and that in Puerto Berrio a great faith exists towards the “animas” of the dead persons. However, what was important for me, on this first trip, was to understand that a buried NN in Puerto Berrio is a person reported missing from another place in the country. Therefore,
my visits to Puerto Berrio had to continue to be able to go deeper in all these stories, because in one visit, one only gets to perceive the surface. A person, met by chance at the cemetery, told me that he had three adopted NN and that one of them had granted him with a “favour” (allowing him to win the lottery). He showed me the tombs. Toño goes every day to clean them: they must “shine”, especially the tomb which induced the miracle. It was a tomb with a glass window and a key, a tomb that he himself opens and closes. He used to keep the key with a string around his neck.

*Did you meet this person during your first visit?*

Yes, it was the first visit. I realized that Toño had baptized his NN with women’s names, yet without knowing their real gender. He called Sonia one of them. To the others, he had given his last name, and even his second last name to two of them. This made me think of baptism: the fact that baptism given in death has a strong symbolic meaning, which drives back human dignity to the dead body, and even makes it a cherished being, almost a family member. This practice of baptizing the adopted NN, I found in posterior visits.

During my first visit, I started to get to know the cemetery, to observe, to talk with some people, to feel the environment of Puerto Berrio. Of course I had the opportunity to take photos, but I did not have a clear idea on how I wanted to take them. What interests me are the processes: today, in my photos, we can observe many tombs which do not exist anymore. This is a lively cemetery: through my photography, I observe how tombs change as time goes by. I have captured surprising moments on such issue.

*Could you go further on this point?*

When the NN bodies are given burial, people “choose” one of them. Then, they start praying, asking “favours” to the soul. In reward, they paint the tombs, decorate them, put flowers on them, as well as an ivory plaque to thank for the received “favour”. As I said, they even baptize them. Some tombs have only a first name, and in others, NN are given a last name. This ritual shows us that there is something utilitarian in this, a sort of exchange in which both parties somehow receive something in exchange. But there is also something very different, much deeper: through baptism, death is humanized as such. According to what I observed in this cemetery, the most left aside people are the ones who “choose” NN’s. It is not the owner of the shop – or of the pharmacy or of the supermarket –: it is the most humble people who ask a “favour” to the souls. There are also many families who have a missing family member themselves – in Puerto Berrio there are hundreds of disappeared. They adopt an NN hoping perhaps that, in another place, in another cemetery, someone does the same with his/her son, brother, father or spouse. Isn’t this ritual a symbolic way of going into mourning?
At the moment of your presentation at the Galeria Sextante, you insinuated that the recovery of the bodies from the river was, before any ritual of adoption, a very significant act as well...

A body which is extracted from the river is an evidence, but also a hope, for any family with disappeared members. Yet this practice is not at all easy. To recover bodies from the river, a political will from local authorities must exist. In Puerto Berrio, according to what I understood, it is the fisherman, the fireman or even the policeman, who brings the body of an NN to Legal Medicine. The forensic doctor makes the necropsy and after eight days, if nobody comes to retrieve or recognize the body, it is given to the Town Hall and to the Church in order to give burial. The coffin of an NN is paid by the Town Hall and the Church provides the tomb. Then is when the adoption ritual starts.

This ritual – according to what I heard from many people in Puerto Berrio – started at the beginning of the eighties. Gloria Valencia, a woman who has adopted an NN and baptized him with the name of Lucas Fandiño, told me that it was during the period known as the “Pablo Escobar Era” that lines of dead people were floating on the river. She said there were so many of them, that she stopped eating fish.

I believe that, at the collective – and perhaps unconscious – level, what happens with the NN in Puerto Berrio is an act of resistance. For a person, to choose a body or a piece of body, is an act of courage which is not at all easy, legally speaking. The perpetrators of violence throw the bodies in the river to erase any evidence.

During the painting workshops with the ex-fighters, I heard stories of very recurring practices used in paramilitarism, which consist in opening the stomach of the victim, and taking all organs out, in order for the body to sink faster. Yet, in Puerto Berrio, the body of an NN is a proof; and recovering such a body is as if you were saying to the murderers: “Here in Puerto Berrio, we do not let your victims missing. Here, we recover them, we give them burial, we ask them ‘favours’, we take care of their fragments and, above all, we baptize them in death. We even give them our last names. Here, we make the NN ours”.

Not very far from Puerto Berrio, in a village called San Miguel, on the banks of the River La Miel, there is not even one NN in the cemetery. A lady told me that local paramilitarism had prohibited the burial of the NN. They all had to go to the river. The cemetery of that small village, also extremely affected by war, made me think of what happens in Puerto Berrio.

Have you ever met fishermen who have recovered bodies?

On my last visit, in November 2010, I went to show Requiem NN. With these photos, they asked me to inaugurate the Casa de la Cultura de Puerto Berrio. On this occasion, I had the opportunity to meet many fishermen and to hear their stories. One of them, Carlos, told me that sometimes, when he threw the fishing nets, he recovered heads and arms – or other parts of human bodies. Others told me how they rescued and then stocked each body part on the riverbank, so that the
vultures came to eat them. What Carlos also said is that, many people never rescued bodies, and just left them there to drown. The act of rescuing or recovering a body is scary for many, and produces fear when thinking of armed groups who may come to kill the rescuers, or of local authorities who may be asking too many questions. Do you remember that, in one of the corners of the cemetery, a fisherman was whispering, telling us that rescuing a body led to big problems with justice, as it was an opportunity for the police to deeply investigate? Therefore he preferred forgetting about the body, left floating on the river. If there is no political will from local administrations, it becomes very difficult for people to rescue bodies. Noel Palacios, one of the singers in Bocas de Ceniza, told me that when he was a child, he used to see “small boats” with dead people. Dead bodies tied to one another, flowing down on the Atrato River, with graffiti written on their skins, saying: “Do not touch me”. Therefore, I do believe that recovering a body is an act of courage, an act of transgression.

Domingo Mena, of whom I spoke already, is a fisherman from the Atrato River. He generally says that, when you see many vultures approaching, it is sign that a dead body is floating on the river. Then, he withdraws the body from the vultures, puts it on a small boat, and gives it to the Mayor. He tells me he has given burial to various NN’s at the cemetery of Bojaya. He cares for the NN. He is a very human person. He was the one who cleaned the church of Bojaya, after the massacre. He says that the dead were left three days outside because the church was left without a roof: so they stayed there, until Silver, one of the guerrilla’s leader, told him: “Either you take and recover the bodies or I put gasoline on all this”. So, along with other two men, he recovered the bodies’ pieces. And he says that, as he did so, he cried and composed songs to all who were dead. I must say that his song “a cappella” in Bocas de Ceniza, even after years of listening to it, has never failed to move me.

Which stories have you listened to in the course of your numerous visits, especially during the last ones?

There is a story which has never ceased to impress me. A mother knows that in Puerto Berrio people recover missing persons’ bodies. She comes to the “sepoltero” and asks him if he knows of her disappeared son. The man sees her anguish and her pain, and tells her: “I will help you in finding your son”. Then, he brings bones from different bodies, and just like with a puzzle, constructs a skeleton. He then asks her if it could be her son. The woman, facing the bones and having no other evidence – e.g. a cloth or something of that sort –, answers: “Yes, this is my son”.

There is another story. A boy, Wilmer is his name, had been a professional soldier for many years, coming from Puerto Berrio. After leaving the army, he suffers from sickness, without knowing what it is. He goes to a “naturalist” doctor and the doctor says: “You must adopt an NN”. This story shows how much such ritual is rooted in the local social fabric, produced by years of violence in the region. Wilmer did not want to adopt an NN; he believes it is a great responsibility and he is afraid to be forced to take care of him in the long run.
In your opinion, what is the role of the artist in such a complex and profound ritual?

In that particular social context, I am interested in finding the breaches through which humanity shows its face. How shall I refrain from photographing something I must not forget? Imagine, I arrive at Puerto Berrio only in 2006, and if the ritual had started during the eighties, how many NN tombs have I not seen, how many have I not been able to photograph? How many have already disappeared and how many were lost in oblivion? In my photos – and I repeat, it has been four years of work in Puerto Berrio –, we see tombs which do not exist today any longer. My photography helps keeping a visual memory of this ritual, so human and so complex. Knowing that, in this cemetery, there are no strict rules: each person comes in, and paints his/her tomb just the way he/she likes. Any person could write whatever he/she feels. It is not like in many other cemeteries, where strict rules exist; in this sense, there is total freedom as well as special aesthetics – both popular and religious.

I believe this aesthetics is not neutral... It is founded in a double transgression. It first transgresses the order of war which seeks to generalize violence, but it also transgresses the religious order, which seeks to format answers. In this way of adopting and abandoning tombs, in this way of baptizing and re-baptizing, beyond the dead person’s gender for example, there is something which appears to be an absolute transgression. This makes me think of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher, called “savage ontology”. It is the “savagery of life” opposing “the savagery of death”. Yet, in order for this savagery to be operative, it needs to take roots in rituals, in traditions, in a precise sense of what is sacred. Religion becomes, then, the centre of a specific link between people affected by disappearance and the rest of the world. Such link rejects immediate death and recreates a long term horizon; it is a belief in the extensive sense of the word.

Your observation is fascinating, and I share that idea. As you say, baptizing in death is a double transgression. Could we call it a secular baptism?

Yes, secular, but not in the exact sense of the term used in Europe. We speak here of a very popular and free conception of baptism, which corresponds to a mix between agnosticism and indigenous peoples’ specific spirituality – a spirituality which was existing before the Spanish conquest. It is a symbolic truth which is seen there, opened to the plurality of interpretations. It is not a dogmatic truth, nor a scientific truth. The way “factual truth” tried to replace “gods’ truth” in Western countries during the 19th century is the mark of a strong difficulty to reflect the role symbolic truth has in our culture, particularly to resist to violence. In a world that has separated the sphere of knowledge (based on factual truth) from the sphere of culture (based on the search of meaning, and inhabited by symbols), violence always comes back like a boomerang, as there is no limitation to the idea that violence may always be legitimate to restore “factual truth” – through torture, through a war based on the law of the strongest, etc. On the contrary, the ability to take support on culture, to link everyday life with a taste of hope, allows stopping the infernal circle of cold violence. Because, behind the facts, hides an impulse that nothing and nobody can stop, as what happens in Puerto Berrio: the impulse to offer respectful burial to unknown people who could, in effect, be close relatives; in brief, the impulse to enlarge the perimeter of human ties. Such a desire, nobody can alienate it. Of course, symbolic truth has to take root in what is singular, concrete, and contingent: you must name, stricto sensu. On the other hand, the challenge of such a gesture is not to check whether or not it is effectively the
I totally agree. As an artist, what is important most of all is symbolic truth.

**ON THE LIMITS OF THE ARTISTIC ACT: A WAR WE DON’T SEE ANY LONGER... BUT WHICH IS SEEN BY THE COMBATANTS**

*We could now talk about your last artistic experience? It is La guerra que no hemos visto, first exposed at the Modern Art Museum of Bogota in October 2009, with the help of Ana Tisconia. The exhibition circulated and was presented at the Museum of Antioquia in Medellín during the spring of 2010. Yet, in order for the reader to understand, the pieces shown are only the last phase of a whole process. Moreover, it is not about photos, but about pictures: pictures made by ex-fighters, coming from diverse armed sectors (FARC, paramilitaries and armed forces). They were created in special “workshops”, which lasted almost two years. Could you tell us more about this?*

After the project *La María* in 2001, as I told you, I had the wish to listen to the stories from the other side. In other words, I wanted to know stories of the murderers. Murderers who most of the time are very young – some of them being as old as he sons and daughters of the seven women who had been kidnapped. I asked myself: what brought them to the path of war, what stories would their childhood be made of? Then I met three boys, ex-paramilitaries, at the House of Culture, in La Ceja, a village near Medellín. They were there at this moment, and I proposed them to work with me – I had opened a foundation which provided people with artistic workshops a few years before. Their answer was not immediate, but I returned several times to La Ceja and, finally, they accepted.

This is how the first workshop began: it concerned ex-paramilitaries. After several weeks, these boys brought some of their friends along – all fighters or ex-fighters –, and began to express their personal stories on paintings. It seemed to me that this was a project on memory for a country with little memory, and a political obsession to deny the existence of war. That’s why we went to the Programa de Atencion Complementaria a la Poblacion Reincorporada, at the City Hall of Bogota, whose coordinator is Dario Villamizar. He opened his doors to us, so that we could work with many other ex-fighters, including those from the guerrilla. All of the workshops were made of ex-combatants, all chosen on a voluntary basis. Later on, we worked with women – coming from the guerrilla – and with soldiers – members of the National Army wounded in combat. These “workshops” lasted a bit more than two years. The leaders – Fernando Grisales, Noel Palacios and myself –, achieved to build up an atmosphere of mutual trust; it allowed the participants to express themselves through paintings. It could not have been any other way. I told them: “Teach me what war is, because I need to know it from its inside”.

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* A programme in charge of welcoming ex-fighters, coming from illegal armed groups. It aims at providing them with paths of reintegration into society. This programme exists since 2002.
“Would you allow this to be shown in museums, or in the public space?”, we asked them, as we discovered that these paintings were educating us about war, a war which seems to annihilate us. They felt well in being able to express their stories. In my thought, it was never a therapy, but I felt great happiness when they said that painting allowed them to unburden reality, so that they were able to say things they had never said before. “Nobody would have believed us”, some said. It was very important to proceed this way, as art was a medium they did not know nor control. With language one is able to tell the story, but is also able to edit it as it goes. Here in these paintings, the unconscious was brought up. They could paint red skies symbolizing blood. They also showed us the geography of the war, which remains unknown to many urban Colombians. Lastly, they were confronted to their own victims. They painted without escaping the fact that they were protagonists. I think this generated a process of reflection inside the intimacy of each of them, though I believe such process of awareness takes time – they very seldom justified themselves, saying they were just “following orders”.

If I understand correctly, you first contacted ex-paramilitaries, before meeting ex-members of the guerrilla. In both cases, your intention was to set up a long-term dialogue, in order to build up mutual confidence and to allow the workshop to operate. Were there differences between groups?

The ex-members of the guerrilla originated, for the majority of them, from the south of the country. The ex-paramilitaries mostly came from Antioquia’s east – these are culturally different regions. Those coming from the National Army had roots in all Colombian regions. Their paintings are personal testimonies, and this is precisely what I wanted to get, above the differences between each group. The atrocities committed are unimaginable. They coincide – no matter the group – in telling how one or the other takes part in violence to win vengeance on the other group, who killed a father, raped a sister, or assassinated the whole family. The “eye for an eye” rule is a constant in Colombia’s war. We have not been able to break these recurring cycles of violence. There is a painting from one of the women, a portrait of herself executing her own cousin with whom she had entered the guerrilla. He was suffering from malaria and could not do his guard. The commandant, as a punishment, ordered to tie him to a tree. She had to look after him. His cousin spoke to her, and suggested her to escape with him. One day, they were heard by a companion. The latter told the commandant, and the commandant asked her to kill her cousin. The cousin told her: “I am sick; you are well, you can kill me”. So she painted him on the floor, because he threw himself on the floor so that she could kill him more easily. And there were many other heart-breaking paintings. The women made unforgettable pieces. All of them are farmers; they represent what I call the pawns in the chess of war, i.e. the ones that had to do the “dirty work”. In saying this, I do not justify their crimes, nor any of the atrocities they committed.

From your point of view, what is the global balance of this initiative?

In the Museum of Modern Art in Bogota, it was a very short exhibition, it only lasted a month. Then, the exhibition travelled to Medellin and lasted three months. In 2011, it has been shown at the Museum La Tertulia, in Cali. Many young people have gone to both exhibitions – there was a
good and large public. We also brought many of the ex-fighters along to see their artwork exposed. There were press editorials and the exposition made a certain buzz on television. It is important that this war is shown and takes more visibility, as so many people deny it, including the Colombian government. I believe that these paintings can tell us a lot about reality. Ana Tisconia, the Museum director in Medellin, said something very important: “Upon seeing these paintings we realize that the victims’ word is true. Most of the time, we do not believe what they say, we think they exaggerate their stories.”

**How do you explain then the critics of this exposition?**

I thought that the critics would have been much more controversial. I imagined that people were going to write against the exhibition, because they express the voices of those who killed. Even though, in the paintings, I repeat, the victim is one of the protagonists. Globally speaking, *La guerra que no hemos visto* did not pass unattended. Furthermore, Ana Tisconia, who had studied Colombian conflict very well, had very clear in her mind that it is a very complex one. We therefore decided to publish a catalogue made of academic and scientific essays, experts very respected in different disciplines (history, psychology, geography etc.), as a way to help us perceive this complexity.

You are totally right, to maintain the existence of a certain complexity is important, as opposed to the constant stereotypes that weigh over numerous armed conflicts. The complexity represents an undeniable element of Colombian reality, even if this – by no way – could be used to support moral relativism. However, I would like to conclude this exchange with several observations. On one hand, from a normal citizen’s point of view, and, on the other, from a more academic point of view, being someone who worked on these topics. Three crucial points can be underlined.

The first has to do with your own path as an artist: to understand the strength of this new experience, I believe we must place it within your own evolution. *La Maria* tells the story of a kidnapping, *Las tumbas de Puerto Berrio* touched upon the topic of forced disappearance. In both situations, your artistic work made emphasis on resistance, not only in front of violence but in front of subjugation that violence generates. In this case, what you expose is the ex-fighters’ point of view, the one of those who participated to the mechanisms leading to collective death. Overall, you provide the observer with a wide outlook over war, which until now has resisted to the temptation of polarization. Having said this – second observation – the fact of working with ex-fighters, who are still in the midst of violence, introduces a new dimension in your artwork: considering these combatants as “mere” humans. Such a consideration aims at deconstructing the idea that Colombian violence would be the expression of a “pathology” or of an “exception”. This brings us again to the image of the Medusa: it has to be stressed that the face of the Medusa is also human. The petrifying and horrific is precisely the fact that a real Medusa is not the origin of the abominable: people responsible for mass violence are ordinary people.

Here is where the third point comes out. It talks about the “ontological distance” between perpetrators and victims. An exhibition in which ex-fighters are artworks’ authors would be absolutely immoral if their acting was to be promoted. Nevertheless, there is no ambiguity in this issue: your art, in this exhibition like in many others, constantly criticizes the chain of violence, in which perpetrators actively participate. What has to be firmly
condemned is that such violence is supposedly inexpressible, as if those who participated were not, like the victims, members of mankind. This is where the issue lies. For example, we know that, in L’écriture ou la vie, Jorge Semprun strongly rejects the idea that something “inexpressible” would exist in the Holocaust experience. To him, it is intrinsic to mass violence to try and escape any critical analysis; the risk is that it is finally interpreted as a “destiny”, or even a “second nature”. It is the best way for it to become excusable. Yet, does rejecting the “inexpressible” necessarily implies giving the floor to perpetrators? Yes, under the condition that painting should strictly respect the rules of elementary ethics, consisting in never confounding the roles, in underlining the crucial role of moral judgement, even during radical artistic experiences. This is the point of view of Jean Hatzfeld, journalist and writer, specialising in the Tutsi genocide, in Rwanda. After dedicating a book to the survivors’ testimonies in Dans le nu de la vie, he decided to listen to the perpetrators’ word. For him, it was not in vain. He allowed people to know about such word in a second book, of same quality, titled: Une saison de machettes. In this case, perpetrators had already been condemned; there was no doubt about their guilt. This book was an attempt to explore the “extermination work”, showing how it became an ordinary practice, made of daily tasks (cooking, sleeping, etc.). In the Colombian case, the distance between victims and perpetrators has to be located at the centre of the reflection. It does not occur spontaneously, knowing the persistency of war logics throughout the country. However, I insist: this distance, in Rwanda as in Colombia, can never be abolished. It is the foundation for a wider moral structure, in which resides the intimate impulse to resist to violence. Without it, everything could collapse, including art. This is exactly what I mean when I use the term: “ontological distance”. It deals with the basic conditions for human beings to be recognized as moral subjects in society.

Finally, controversy could legitimately arise from what we have talked about. In your final work, you say that combatants are the instruments of a system which remains beyond their control and, inversely, that their victims are the protagonists of their paintings. This is true and must be highlighted. Main perpetrators of such mass violence do not paint, and will never do so. The ex-combatants you tell us about are the “pawns of an immense game of chess”. Yet, such an answer remains insufficient, because perpetrators are still actors who participated in war, and because their victims are forced to remain silent. Therefore, I would like to close our discussion on such controversial issue.

It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that dispute stands at the core of any artistic activity, especially when artwork is carried out near the places of violence. Cortes de florero, La Maria or Las tumbas de Puerto Berrio are not pieces without controversy. In his/her own gesture, the artist takes the risk of making a special usage of violence, locating it in the centre of his/her aesthetic work. Even when acting in favour of resistance or denouncement, being an artist leads to controversy. Nevertheless, it is true that La guerra que no hemos visto adds an additional step to such controversy. It abolishes a new limit: working with ex-combatants. There, stands an extreme tension in the heart of artistic experience. This is why, far from being detrimental to the global work, it seems important to underline the impossibility of producing a steady, serene and calm language on such topics. Your attempt reveals that artistic activity has an abyss at its core. That’s why your work should not be “defended” against “attacks”. Furthermore, our dialogue invites people to consider your work through its density, its complexity, its richness, i.e. without anticipating on how it could be received by visitors. In this case, the Other is dressed with the clothes of aesthetical judgement: the meaning of artistic act remains essentially uncertain, especially when it explores the hidden paths of an already established order. All your activity has been built against Colombian violence: within such a frame, the risks you take are as thunders, dividing the social fabric of a society at war. Yet, who knows the sound of the thunder’s echoes in every one’s conscience?