



ESCENA. Revista de las artes
ISSN: 2215-4906
escena.iiarte@ucr.ac.cr
Universidad de Costa Rica
Costa Rica

Villena, Sofía
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ESCENA. Revista de las artes, vol. 77, no. 1, 2017, July-December, pp. 135-147
Universidad de Costa Rica
Costa Rica

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=561161114009>

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Sofía Villena



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Marginalized Memories Architectural Interventions and Reparative Actions in the tenth edition of the Central American Biennale “Todas las vidas”

*Memorias Marginalizadas
Intervenciones arquitectónicas y acciones representativas
en la décima edición de la Bienal Centroamericana
“Todas las vidas”*

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Recibido: 9 de mayo del 2017 **Aprobado:** 19 de junio de 2017

Abstract:

A comparative, critical approximation to the artistic productions of Óscar Figueroa Chaves, “Intervención en el edificio de la UFCO”, and Marcos Agudelo, “Cianómetro”, is presented. These pieces were a part of the tenth Central American Biennale “Todas las vidas”, curated by Tamara Díaz Bringas in the year 2016, in the provinces of Limón and San José, Costa Rica. The analysis of these works addresses the complexities found in the ways architectural patrimony in Costa Rica assigns historical meaning and value to public spaces. Through a re-contextualization of the concepts and aesthetic qualities associated to, in the case of Figueroa, the pesticide blue plastic used in banana plantations, and in the case of Agudelo, the sky, this essay explores the urgent need to make visible, palpable, the way public spaces exclude certain populations from their historical memory in addition to reflecting on what can constitute a reparative actions.

Keywords: Architectural Patrimony, Central American Biennale, Contemporary Art, Artistic In-

tervention, Public Space.

Resumen

Se presenta una aproximación comparativa y crítica de dos producciones artísticas, una de Óscar Figueroa Chaves, titulada “Intervención en el edificio de la UFCO”, y otra de Marcos Agudelo, denominada “Cianómetro”. Ambas propuestas se realizaron el año 2016, como parte de la Décima Bienal Centroamericana “Todas las vidas”, curada por Tamara Díaz Bringas en las provincias de Limón y San José, Costa Rica. Se explora cómo estas intervenciones cuestionan la asignación de significados y valores históricos a los espacios públicos, por parte de las instituciones que definen y resguardan el patrimonio arquitectónico en Costa Rica. Se puntualiza en la necesidad de estos artistas de hacer visible y palpable a ciertas poblaciones excluidas de la memoria histórica, así como de proponer formas para curar y remendar las heridas y olvidos provocados por estas acciones excluyentes.

Palabras clave: Patrimonio Arquitectónico, Bienal Centroamericana, Arte Contemporáneo, Intervención Artística, Espacio Público.

The Costarican philosopher Alexander Jiménez (2002) concludes his book *El imposible país de los filósofos* with a call to “...ejercer una memoria activa y no un olvido pasivo de las condiciones en que algunas instituciones fueron construidas y otras destruidas, otear el horizonte en el que se entendían, dudaban, luchaban, ejercían sus poderes, los grupos y sujetos.” (p. 277) The curator and art historian Miwon Kwon (2002) reflects on how contemporary art has responded to the problematic discussed by Jiménez. When elaborating on North American artist Richard Serra’s site specific work, Kwon defines it as a discomposure between the art work and its site; a discomposure “intended to bring into relief the repressed social contradictions that underlie public spaces... rendering them perceptible, thus knowable, to the viewing subject to the sculpture.” (p. 75) I am interested in the intersections that come up when considering these two scholars in relation to one another: how contemporary site specific artwork has foregrounded and re-politicized the role of architectural spaces in the shaping of collective memory. What are some tools, questions, and challenges brought up by Central American contemporary art regarding this reactivation, contextualization, and re(palpa)lization of erased memories of marginalized populations from public spaces?¹

In attending to this question, I utilize as a case study the tenth edition of the Central American Biennale, “Todas las vidas” (translated to the English language as: “All Lives”), curated by Tamara Díaz Bringas. This biennale intended to reclaim the collective and public aspects of space by reflecting on ways to resist the privatization of what should be common through artistic intervention. In this way, rather than following biennales’ conventional pavilion format, it brought the art to the streets and open spaces in various locations in Costa Rica’s capital, San José and its Caribbean province, Limón, in the fall of 2016. Ultimately, this biennale sought to motivate the audience to engage in questions of belonging and value. Díaz (2016) asks the public: with which tools can we question a system that prioritizes some lives as worthy while perceiving and depicting others as residual?

For the purpose of this essay², I have chosen to analyze Óscar Figueroa Chaves’s³ intervention in the old United Fruit Company offices in the city of Limón, in relation to Marcos

¹ Some other texts and compilations that attend to this question to some extent in the context of Central America are *Todo incluido: Imágenes de Centroamérica* (2004) and *Estrecho dudoso* (2006), catalogues of Central American and International Exhibitions with the same title.

² I would like to thank the generosity of the artists in providing photographs for this essay in addition to the contributions of my classmates and Professor Berit Potter, in the course Painting the Walls.

³ Óscar Figueroa Chaves (1996) is a Costa Rican contemporary artist. He resides and works in the capital of Costa Rica, San José. More information about his work can be found at <http://oscarfigueroachaves.blogspot.com/search/label/Curriculum>.

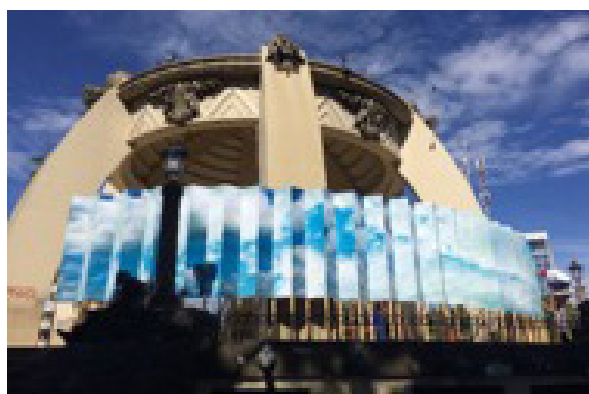
Agudelo's⁴ intervention of the kiosks of the Central Park (Parque Central) in the city of San José. Both of these pieces, installed for the biennale, are site specific reevaluations of their space and the history thereof, working through an interventional confronting aesthetic which targets architectonic patrimony in Costa Rica. As theoretical referents for this analysis I use artists and scholars such as Philippe Bourgeois (1994), Patricia Fumero (2015), Carlos Sandoval (2002), Jared List, Jennifer Doyle, Sarah Beetham and Math Bass. In taking into account the biennale's proposal of bringing back the collective and public elements of space, a side to side analysis of these two artistic pieces can open up a rich negotiation of the potential definition of these precise concepts, raising questions of what kind of artistic architectural interventions can deal with the complexity of trauma and memory more aptly.

Figura 1. Panoramic view of "Intervención en el edificio de la UFCO", Limón.



Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Figura 2. Panoramic view of "Cianómetro", San José.



Photograph courtesy of the artist.

"Intervención en el edificio de la UFCO"

Óscar Figueroa's piece "Intervención en el edificio de la UFCO" ("Intervention in the Building of the UFCO") takes on the history of the United Fruit Company (1899-1970), a commercial multi-national firm from the United States, located in various regions of South and Central America, including the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Costa Rica. The UFCO produced and exported tropical fruits from Latin American territory, especially to the United States.

⁴ Marcos Agudelo (1978) is a Nicaraguan architect and working contemporary artist. He is based in the city of Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. More information about his work can be found in his web site <http://marcosagudelo.com/bio/?lang=en>.

During that time, the UFCO truly became a determining political and economic factor. To the extremes of promoting coup d' état and political bribery in some countries, the UFCO maintained their goal of economically exploiting the territory. In Costa Rica, one of the main working population for the UFCO's banana plantations were migratory black men and women from Jamaica that settled in the Caribbean Coast (Limón province). Some of these workers initially came to the country to initially build the Atlantic railroad in 1871, and others came in response to the company's workforce demand.

The historical elements highlighted by the artist as most relevant to this piece is the belief that throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, black workers in Costa Rica did not have permission to travel to the West of the country. Figueroa narrates in his artist statement that this belief was in part enforced with the objective of impeding workers from finding jobs at the new banana and coffee plantations. Furthermore, he states that this segregation was reinforced by governmental policies of "whitening", which pretended to limit the mobility of Black workers to the capital, arguing the "necessity" of preventing disease transmission from Black workers to the populations of the Central Valley.

Corroborating the information underlined by the artist concerning the prohibition of Blacks from traveling to the West, the anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (1994) says,

Los historiadores no han podido encontrar documentación oficial que confirme que los negros tenían prohibido emigrar al Valle Central de Costa Rica. Sin embargo, se me dijo repetidas veces por parte de costarricenses que, durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, se prohibió a los negros visitar el resto del país. Lo predominante de esta creencia demuestra que aún si la restricción a los viajes de los negros fuera de la provincia atlántica nunca se codificó, debió existir una gran hostilidad hacia ellos fuera de la región hacia los años cincuenta, pues de otra manera el mito no estaría tan firmemente arraigado. (p. 141)

Regarding the governmental policy of "whitening" mentioned by Figueroa, Alexander Jiménez (2002) states:

Con el fracaso del ferrocarril nacional y la llegada al país de grupos de trabajadores de "raza y cultura distintas", el proyecto político de blanqueamiento de la población fue reforzado. El Estado liberal opta por un discurso nacionalista de tipo terapéutico, es decir, de apoyo a medidas sanitarias para conservar la raza blanca. (p. 195)

Later in the same chapter, Jiménez adds, "La inmigración de negros era vista por ciertos grupos de poder con un cierto tipo de pánico social. Se los ligaba a enfermedades como la sífilis, la lepra y la tuberculosis." (p. 200) Jiménez's book further helps to substantiate the fact that this history has been institutionally omitted and watered down in nationalistic historical narratives of Costa Rica.

The UFCO central offices of Costa Rica located in Limón, of 3528 m², were built between 1903 and 1904. The building is strategically located in front of the railroad station, customs, the wharf and the green areas of the railway. Its architectural style is Victorian Caribbean, with perimetral corridors and steel handrails (Sanou & Quesada, 1998, p. 286). These offices are one of the few buildings left from beginning of century and were declared a privately owned patrimony in February 18th, 1999⁵. Attempting to flip this suppressed history, Figueroa utilizes the light blue plastic wrap that is used to protect the bananas from pests, while endangering the workers' health, to cover up from bottom to top the UFCO central offices.

To understand the relevance of Figueroa's intervention, one needs to ask: what is the kind of discourse that accompanies the declaration of the UFCO building as patrimony? ICOMOS's official webpage states that the value of the UFCO building as patrimony relies on its architectural, aesthetic, historical and symbolic value. In contrast, the values that support the declaration of the Black Star Line, for instance, –built in 1922, it functioned as the headquarters of the Asociación Universal para el Mejoramiento del Negro (UNIA, Universal Negro Improvement Association), created and directed by the activist Marcus Garvey– declared patrimony in March 16, 2000⁶, are *antiquity*, historical and symbolical. What kind of judgements defines here the aesthetic and architectural value, and to which socio-political components and interests are those judgements attached and simultaneously reflect? If the architecture, dimensions, and location of the UFCO building were designed to facilitate the economic, political, and cultural power that this company had and actively tried to grow in the territory, then: Why are its aesthetic and architectural values thought separately from its historical and symbolic dimensions? What are the effects of this separation in the construction of Limón's historical memory?

The long and disputative (H)istory of fine arts have continuously argued about the extent to which aesthetics, materials, processes, contexts, and concepts can be understood separately or independently from each other. The academic and artistic productions of art critic and queer theorist Jennifer Doyle and interdisciplinary artist Math Bass are strong contemporary examples of work that sunders the formal(ist) barriers of our understanding of aesthetics. By bringing about these thinkers to the table, I want to ask in which ways the preservation of this building in accordance to its aesthetic value separated from its historical one can allow an active institutional neglect of how racism has violently shaped (our) country. Furthermore,

⁵ See <http://www.patrimonio.go.cr/busqueda/Inmueble.aspx> for the specific data on the declaration of the UFCO old offices as patrimony.

⁶ See <http://www.patrimonio.go.cr/busqueda/Inmueble.aspx> as well for the specific data on the declaration of the Black Star Line as patrimony.

through the snatching up of physical space, it can serve as a tool to manipulate and shape, not only its historical memory, but also the present flow and routines of people in Limón.

Art historian Sarah Beetham, in her article “From Spray Cans to Minivans: Contesting the Legacy of Confederate Soldier Monuments in the Era of Black Lives Matter”, discusses the role of monuments in shaping the use of a space in addition to its collective memory. Beetham (2016) specifically analyzes how commemorative statues of confederate soldiers, in the Southern states of the United States, celebrate notions of the civil war history that continue to marginalize black life and perpetuate violence towards these populations. The author cites the work of Owen Dayer and Derek Alderman. (Cited by Beetham, 2016) Both of these scholars “have traced the significance of place in collective memory, examining how the visibility of memorials in public space shapes the way viewers remember and interpret the past.” (p. 27) This last quote brings us to consider how a monument is discursively framed, the impact of its visibility in the use of that space, and therefore how it choreographs people and histories by strategically prioritizing specific historical narratives. Beetham’s theory can incentivize the reader to ask: What are the outcomes when the architectural beauty of the UFCO building is celebrated without highlighting under what values this concept of beauty operates? Which political and social purposes motivated the company to adopt certain architecture, location, dimensions and what have been its consequences throughout time? What is omitted when simply understating it as a symbol of beauty? What kind of memories does this building bring about and how is its reputation as patrimony of aesthetic value responding to those memories?

I would like to ask the reader to consider in which ways the discourse that supports the declaration of the UFCO building⁷ as patrimony can dangerously serve as an act of sterilization; one that pushes the violence behind while bringing its architectural beauty forward. By wrapping the UFCO building, Figueroa flips the notion of sterilization that has been utilized throughout the segregation of black workers in Costa Rica. Figueroa’s use of the pesticide wrapper can be first read as advertizing and/or protecting the viewers, the inhabitants and visitors of Limón, from the pests that inhabit this building. A second read can be that Figueroa’s use of the pesticide wrapper, now surrounding the UFCO building, makes visible the institutionalized protection and sanitization of the atrocities committed by the UFCO and how its patrimony(alization) harms the people from Limón.

⁷ I would like to mention here that the legislative assembly building presently occupies the Central Offices of the UFCO in San José. See <http://www.patrimonio.go.cr/busqueda/Inmueble.aspx> for its patrimonial declaration.

Óscar Figueroa's piece in conversation with the work of the scholar Sarah Beetham challenges people to reflect on how objects in the public sphere can not only take focus in physical space but also space in time and memory. Figueroa's piece can remind us of the relevance and potential of bringing about material specificity. Firstly, there is a re-contextualization of materiality – by relating the blue wrapper to the UFCO building, the use of the material inside the UFCO's history makes palpable the toxicity of the institution itself. Secondly, by subverting the material's own function inside a history, the material is understood as a political space, one where we can redraw the conditions for producing meaning and defining citizenship. This artistic process further questions the neutrality proposed by the aesthetic patrimonialism. In this way, we have a blue wrapper, once a pesticide that protected the commodity while endangering the workers' lives, now as a tool for resisting the perpetuation of racism and colonialism and their still unquestioned presence.

“Cianómetro”

Marcos Agudelo's piece “Cianómetro” also takes on the refashioning of a patrimony as a strategy for intervention⁸. Agudelo's large-scale “Cianómetro” is installed around a kiosk in the “Parque Central” (Central Park) in San José city. A cyanometer, attributed to Horace-Benedict de Saussure and Alexander von Humboldt, is an instrument which consists of squares of paper dyed in incrementing shades of blue and arranged in a color circle or square that can be used to measure the blueness of the sky. (“Cyanometer” n.d.) The music kiosk (built between 1944-1948), designed in an Art Deco style or also described as being of a neo-imperial character with modernist decorations, is a result from a series of urban actions, starting in 1932, of “aesthetic interest”, intending to beautify public spaces. Although this kiosk has not been declared as a patrimony in its singularity, it is important to mention that the photo that illustrates the declaration of the Parque Central as a national patrimony in the official webpage, crops the park in a way that the kiosk is portrayed as the main central figure. This kiosk, specifically, was a gift of the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García to the Costa Rican president Rafael Calderón Guardia in the 1940's⁹. In Somoza's life, architecture (an architecture of power) played a central role inside his political project, one realized through torture and other forms of

⁸ Here, the kiosk has not been declared as patrimony as a singular piece but through a collectiveness, the Central Park as a whole. <http://www.patrimonio.go.cr/busqueda/Inmueble.aspx>

⁹ For more information on architectural monuments in Costa Rica, revise: *Historia de la Arquitectura en Costa Rica*, edited by Elizabeth Fonseca and José Garnier and supported by the Fundación Museos del Banco Central and Centro de Investigación Histórica de América Central, Universidad de Costa Rica, 1998. Page 359.

extreme violence. This information can be corroborated through the qualities of the *Tribuna Monumental* or *Presidencial* and through the histories and images that presently inhabit the Catacumbas in the Loma de Tiscapa, Managua.

Similarly to Figueroa's intervention, Agudelo's piece can question the political, historical effects of considering this gift as a part of a beautification urban project. The historian Patricia Fumero (2015) discusses an effect of the installation of this kiosk,

La cultura de la retreta y los recreos finaliza en la década de 1940, cuando el Parque Central es modernizado y su pila reemplazada por el kiosco que actualmente ostenta, el complejo fue complementado con la inauguración del salón de baile-restaurant El Patio Andaluz en los bajos del kiosco. (p. 26)

This quote reveals how the implantation of this kiosk in the Parque Central considerably weakens the public life of the park itself and replaces it for a private space hidden by the precise kiosk. In this way, this artistic intervention can encourage the viewer to ask in which ways this beautifying, understanding neutralizes the architecture of power while camouflaging its construction of further political meaning and historical memory.

In proceeding with this question and a deeper analysis of this piece, it is essential to bring about the complicated political, racial, and economic historical relations between Nicaragua and Costa Rica in regards to Anastasio Somoza as well as more broadly speaking. In *Otros amenazantes: Los nicaragüenses y la formación de identidades nacionales en Costa Rica*, the academic Carlos Sandoval (2002) discusses some of the ways Nicaraguans have been thought and represented as others from multiple Costa Rican angles. The section "¿Cómo los sandinistas se convirtieron en nicas?" specifically narrates how Costa Rica positions itself in relation to Nicaragua Sandinista. Some of the events that Sandoval highlights are: First, even though in 1982 the administration of Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986) declares the neutrality of Costa Rica regarding the regional conflicts, Costa Rica's political compromises, acquired through massive economic debt to the United States, complicate those principles. Second, how the Nicaraguan communist government was described by some Costa Rican voices in terms of corporeal and sexual metaphors. For instance, the presentation of the Sandinista government as a land rapist¹⁰. Lastly, Sandoval reminds us how in 1983, Monge further asks for the support from U.S. president Ronald Reagan in order to rescue the radiophonic sovereignty. (pp. 254-264)

¹⁰ This metaphor is brought back to the surface of public discussions in recent years regarding the dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica for the small island situated in the outfall of the San Juan river border.

Beyond the ways Costa Rica has positioned itself in relation to the Sandinista government and the Somoza dictatorship, we have a broader context: Nicaraguans have been the main migratory, documented and undocumented, labor force in Costa Rica, taking over the lowest paid jobs such as construction, maintenance, and domestic labor. The racism and xenophobia towards such subjects are strongly present throughout Costa Rica's territory, an oppressive relation celebrated and broadly promoted on nationalistic discourses¹¹.

A comparative analysis of the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan national anthems is also relevant in developing a possible interpretation of "Cianómetro". Reiterating, Agudelo wraps this kiosk with a big-scale cyanometer with shades of blue made up from high-resolution photographs of the sky, taken at the same times of the day from both countries, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Both anthems have a section which reflects upon the value of the sky in regards to their perceived definition of national identity. In the case of Costa Rica, its national anthem says, "Bajo el limpido azul de tu cielo, blanca y pura decansa la paz" ("Under the clear blue of *your* sky, white and pure rests peace") [added emphasis] (Translation retrieved from <http://lyrics-translate.com/en/costa-rican-national-anthem-himno-nacional-de-costa-rica-costa-rican-national-anthem.html>)¹². In the case of Nicaragua, its national anthem *Salve a Ti, Nicaragua* states, "Brille hermosa la paz en tu cielo" ("Peace shines in beauty in your skies") [added emphasis] (Translation retrieved from <http://www.nationalanthems.info/ni.htm>)¹³. While in both of these cases, the sky is narrated as a place where peace lies, these sk(ies) are not common, but they are defined within the national space; they are territorialized under a nationalistic framework.

Agudelo's cyanometer can be interpreted as playing with the territorialization of the sky within both national discourses while embracing its connotation of a peace symbol. On the one hand, "Cianómetro" highlights the nationalistic aspects that connote the understanding of

¹¹ This information can be equally corroborated by Sandoval's book, mentioned earlier, the sociologist Sergio Villena (2011) in his book *El perro está más vivo que nunca* –which also approximates to the topic from the art–, and by the sociologist and psychoanalyst Roxana Hidalgo Xirinachs (2016) in her book *Mujeres de las fronteras: subjetividad, migración y trabajo doméstico* –which discusses the labor conditions of Nicaraguan women in Costa Rica and their subjective implications.

¹² The Costa Rican National Anthem was originally adopted in 1853, with the music composed by Manuel María Gutiérrez. The lyrics were later added in 1990, written by José María Zeledón Brenes.

¹³ The Nicaraguan National Anthem, *Salve a Ti, Nicaragua*, was approved in 1939 and officially adopted in 1971. The lyrics were written by Salomón Ibarra Mayorga, and the musical arrangements by Luis A. Delgadillo. Its music dates back to the 18th century, used as a liturgical anthem by a Spanish monk, Fr. Castinove, when the country was a province of Spain.

peace/sky in both anthems. This intervention brings about a disrupted sky, a sky where half of its pieces are shot from Costa Rican land and the other half from Nicaragua. These halves are collaged together, however, depending on the position of the viewer in relation to the piece, they can observe how the sections desynchronize or come to act as an abstract harmonious one. On the other hand, this intervention asks the viewer to go deeper with this idea. Just as the viewer can see the desynchronization of the collaged sky pieces, they cannot forget that from a further distance, they can also achieve to see it acting as one.

Agudelo's piece takes as its conceptual aesthetic material the very symbol of neutrality, of peace, the sky. His intervention can be read as a successful intent to question the primary symbol of neutrality inside both Costa Rican and Nicaraguan political discourses. This intervention can bring attention to: firstly, the discrepancies of political discourses that pretend to position themselves from neutrality and peace in the specific Costa Rica-Nicaragua historical narratives. Secondly, it questions the architecture that supposedly has as main goal the promotion of public life. Instead, it brings about how its aesthetics could have been used as a sterilization of the image of Somoza by presenting him as a promoter of civilization through his choice of architecture. "Cianómetro" makes tangible the contradictions that reside in the existence of this kiosk and its occupation of one of the centers of public life in downtown San José. The architecture of power neutralized and naturalized through an emptying of its historical content, is re-politicized.

Reflecting upon Serra's vision, earlier cited in this essay, in relation to the history that these patrimonies represent and hold, we could interpret that both of these artistic interventions acknowledge and negotiate two contrasting desires: there is the need to re-politicize; to bring about its political, social, historical, and cultural context, and as Serra states, to make palpable its social contradictions. On the other hand, there is the complex and to some extent the persistent contradictory desire to continue arriving at a place of contemplation and the sublime; to re-utilize the precise material, the blue wrapper and the sky, as tools for transcending borders, a kind of universal experience. In the case of "Cianómetro", by thinking of it in regards to the phrase "bajo el mismo cielo" ("under a common sky"): to push it towards what feels in the moment like a utopian idea of two nations operating under one common sky, one common land. In the case of Figueroa's piece, the similar strategy of refashioning the entirety of the UFCO old offices with a light blue pesticide plastic which camouflages the UFCO building with the blue sky. We have the need to re-politicize these patrimonies and their respective histories juxtaposed with the desire to transcend what is given through alluding to the sky in such a way that creates the illusion of disappearance of these patrimonies.

Though this contrasting interpretation can bring about what could be read as an ambiguous political stand from the artists, the presentation of scholar Jared List on the documentary

Invasión and his conversation with the audience in the VI Congreso Centroamericano de Estudios Culturales (Nicaragua, 2017) helped me problematize the juxtaposition of these two contrasting desires deeper. In this presentation, a question raised by the audience concerned the ethical responsibilities of an artist, in List's case a filmmaker, in dealing with silenced collective trauma in addition to the complexities found in healing processes. Reflecting on these two points, Figueroa's and Agudelo's artistic interventions can be read as a conscious negotiation of contrasting forces, desires, and pains underneath ignored and/or oppressed historical readings. Both pieces can be read as reverting the systemic emptying of historical memory achieved in part by aesthetic patrimonial discourses. In other words, bringing back the correlations between aesthetics and the erased historical memories. However, we could also read these pieces as attempting to erase the presence of these monuments for a moment, to blend them with the sky; a contemplative space before a reflective one. In my perspective, the coexistence of these contrasting forces poses a space that can house contradictions without diminishing one political affective intention or need for the other. Then, I would like to finish with this question: what kind of architectonic spaces and patrimonial discourses can be apt for holding complexity rather than simplifying or denigrating competing forces in the remembering and further construction of collective memory?

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