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STITCHED BY FIRE: THE THREAD OF SPARKS OF SANTIAGO ESCOBAR-JARAMILLO'S "COLOMBIA, TIERRA DE LUZ"¹

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"[...] if we are to solve that political problem in practice,
follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty
that we arrive at Freedom."

Friedrich Schiller,

On the Aesthetic Education of Man, Second Letter.

HERE MIGHT NOT BE BETTER place to start this chronicle on the meanderings of an artist across the whole Colombian territory than by focusing on the walls—on one wall, to be more specific—of one of the most central streets in Bogotá. Across from the Tequendama Hotel, on the back wall of an abandoned church, reads, almost faded, hidden underneath all the other graffiti, "Indignarse no es suficiente" ("To get outraged is not enough").

I ignore how long such graffiti has been there, but that is hardly the point; urban platitudes—graffiti, bumper stickers, t-shirt wordings—exist in a perpetual belatedness which makes them live enveloped in an always precise timeless state, addressing us incessantly from a temporal nowhere. Nonetheless, the statement stuck out, amidst the rainy days of Bogotá, not so much for its distant echoes of the social unrest across southern Europe these days, but for signaling a change of moods in what can be considered the "post-conflict" Colombia of today.

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¹ For the most up to date information and the latest developments on the project "Colombia, Tierra de Luz", visit Escobar-Jaramillo's blog: <http://colombiatieradeluz.org/>.

Wall across from Hotel Tequendama, Bogotá, 2012.



Photo: José Falconi.

In fact, if there has been a tectonic shift in the last years in this country it has been the pervasive sensation that the conflict is, somehow, coming to an end. From government commissions to public demonstrations, they all share a glaringly explicit use of the past tense when it comes to talk about the internal conflict. Therefore, what seems to be the lingering question, though still half-mumbled, half-formulated, in the minds of most Colombians might be: What's next?

What can possibly come after outrage for a country ravaged by decades of structural violence that almost feels inherent, intrinsic to itself? How to move beyond outrage? Or, to put it more explicitly: are all sectors of the country really outraged enough to move beyond outrage? Do we really believe that Colombian society, as a whole, is ready to move beyond outrage if some sectors are still reluctant to even feel outraged?

Though no expert in these matters nor prophet of any kind, judging by what happened in similar processes across the region—after all, despite the incredible differences between the Guatemalan, Argentinean, Chilean, Peruvian dirty-war cases and their aftermath, do show a pattern among them—what seems to follow the tenuous peace is the even more tenuous and more confusing period of national reconciliation. In fact, what might be next for

Colombia may entail something prefigured/forecasted by this particular project by photographer Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo. That is: the period of reparations. In other words, what might come next, as a prolonged prologue to the definite peace, is the discussion on how to best honor the victims of the conflict and how to best preserve their memory (their lives, their tragedies) for future generations.

In fact, due to the gravity of the internal conflict, and to the depths that the spiral of violence reached in each of those national contexts, the reparation period in each of these cases was tantamount to the rewriting of the social contract between their citizens. Though it might sound like a possible exaggeration, what the process of reparation amounted to in each of these nation-states was nothing short of their re-founding. Only after confronting trauma head on, the script goes, can the social tissue be stitched back together, and a new beginning will be forged for the convalescent nation.

And it is precisely in the threshold between the familiar outrage and the unknown, smack in the middle of the uncertain healing process where one needs to situate Escobar-Jaramillo's multifaceted project. On the most basic level, it can be conceived as the production/convening of a series of ephemeral memorials communities which have suffered the ravages of war, done with the most basic of materials (fire) in order to facilitate a meditation (first with the members of the community and then with the spectators of the register of the action, through the photographs) through the mediation of the most basic and primal of our binary distinctions: darkness/light. Through the staging of a chiaroscuro (and its loaded poetics), Escobar-Jaramillo reclaims this basic opposition in order to set up the structure of the initiation ceremony he needs to perform time and time again: the before and after, the receding of darkness against light, the passing of obscured times into brighter ones.

For that reason, it might not be surprising to learn that the activities of each intervention are centered around the most archaic of rituals: a preparation of a bonfire—one which Escobar-Jaramillo builds together with the members of the community after having spend days talking with them and conducting a workshop with their participation. Around the fire and with a captive audience, half shaman, half photographer, Escobar-Jaramillo conducts a ritual in which the intractable problems associated with forced displacement and death are, literarily, *brought into light*. There, at the edge of the bonfire, shrouded by its sometime abrasive warmth and light, the community performs an act of symbolic purification, as it starts to tally and confront the conflicting, afflicting past. By invoking their ghosts into the fire, the wounds where they hide might start to get cauterized.

It is only after this ceremony is completed, and the fire is close to extinguishing itself, that Escobar-Jaramillo produces his photographs. Whereas by the temporal lighting of the physical remnants, of the ruins of forced displaced villages, or by producing himself ephemeral structures covered with light bulbs, or by simply enveloping the participants with light, Escobar-Jaramillo finalizes the process by producing sculptures of light to be photographed. In other words, the final horizon of the process is to produce a memorial crafted from light itself, a memorial that “exists” only through and in photography.

This, of course, implies a major difference when confronting the photographs that, for example, accompany this text: they cannot be understood as registers of an action, but as the thing in itself. The memorial *is* made by the photographs in themselves. For that reason, Escobar-Jaramillo ends up producing an homage to photography, as the content depicted mirrors the medium itself: they are both *made out of light*. This alignment of both, content and medium, displaces the whole project onto a dimension by itself, as Vilém Flusser and Andre Bazin coincided in pointing out decades ago:

Basically, therefore, photographers wish to produce states of things that have never existed before; they pursue these states, not out there in the world, since for them the world is only a pretext for the states of things that are to be produced, but amongst the possibilities contained within the camera's program. To this extent, the traditional distinction between realism and idealism is overturned in the case of photography: It is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera's program—only the *photograph is real*².

The photographic image *is the object itself*, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model³.

It is the inversion on the vector of significance (its reality is the photograph, light itself) which actually makes this memorial memorable, as it exploits some of the most heartfelt associations and almost literalizes them: the souls transform into light, the light inscribed in the photographic medium, the photographic medium becoming a memorial itself. In that way, and for a second, the pencil of nature (Talbot, dixit) seems to be capable of capturing and penciling in the supernatural on the paper. It is this brief illusion which makes

2 Flusser, Vilém. 2006. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, p. 37.

3 Andre Bazin. Summer, 1960. The Ontology of the Photographic Image. *Film Quarterly* 13 (4), pp. 4-9.

the whole memorable, as we might be inclined to think, for a split second, that there might be a light that never goes out (Morrissey, dixit).

Register of action at Vereda Quiebra de Naranjal,
Chinchiná-Caldas, April 2012.



Photo: Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo.

By collapsing the physical into the two dimensional, and architecture into photography, Escobar-Jaramillo not only has effectively built a memorial purely made out of light, but has also inscribed himself in the luminous tradition of memorials within the Colombian visual arts of the last decades—a tradition that includes some of the most remarkable work by Oscar Munoz, Doris Salcedo, Beatriz Gonzalez, and others⁴.

⁴ This proliferation of memorials within the Colombian visual arts to the point of transforming itself into a tradition is a topic which, as far as I have seen, has not been dealt directly in academic writing, and which certainly constitutes an area for future exploration.

For more information on Beatriz González's magnificent homage to the victims of violence in the Nacional Cemetery of Bogotá, see Jaime Cerón "Anonymous Auras (Statement)" in ArtNexus no. 76 (March-May 2010) and now available at: <http://www.artnexus.com/>.

It is a complicated arithmetic the one that accompanies the judging of memorials. One needs to be extremely cautious because one should not lose sight that their very existence has implied the demise of human lives under very tragic circumstances and that they are supposed to serve one main function: to mourn their loss and, therefore, to preserve their memory. They are the signs of collective bereavement; they mark a particular mourning process. For this reason, it is particularly complicated to judge them according to aesthetic standards. After all, how to gauge the role of beauty for a particular mourning process? What exactly does it add? Why should it matter?

This kind of question becomes even more pressing when we move into the terrain of art—when the memorials are also conceived and circulated as “art.” In fact, at a very basic level, it is not difficult to see why for many people the mere existence of a robust tradition of extraordinary memorials within the visual arts is as unfortunate as it could get. Colombians, one could argue, would have been better off without the reasons that motivated the existence of such a tradition, even if the art it has sprung is sublime and has advanced the careers of many great artists and produced some of Colombia’s great art.

Nonetheless, these doubts arise from a mistaken reading of the function and nature of memorials, even for the so-called “artistic ones” as Escobar-Jaramillo’s project attests. In the mistake resides in confusing a cause with a reason (a motivation to act). One supposes a material implication (cause), the other one (reason) belongs to the level of language or description. It is a subtle difference, but it is crucially important⁵.

Thus, although the effective cause for the memorial is the tragic demise of many lives, the reason for their erection is a different one: to begin, shore up or culminate a particular mourning process. But one does not necessarily follow the other: a memorial does not follow every tragedy. In other words, the memorial responds to a particular process of grievance, which is critically different (independent) from the causes that effectively originated it. For that reason, it is important to always have in focus that what we are dealing here when judging the “effectiveness” of a memorial is in direct relation with its

For a very good account on the profound effect of Doris Salcedo’s ephemeral memorial (2002) see José Antonio de Ory’s piece “Doris Salcedo: 280 sillas sobre el Palacio de Justicia” first published on December 16, 2002 and now available at: <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/columna/col45/02-12-16-ory.htm>. For more information on Doris Salcedo’s oeuvre see: Nancy Princenthal ed. Doris Salcedo (London: Phaidon, 2000).

For a discussion and assessment of Oscar Muñoz’s body of work see José L. Falconi’s “Two Double Negatives” in *The Meaning of Photography*, Robin Kelsey ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

5 For more a fuller explanation on the crucial differences between causes and reasons, and how reasons end up becoming causes too, see Donald Davidson’s seminal 1963 essay “Actions, Events and Reasons” in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp 3-21.

function: grievance. It needs to be judged, first and foremost, as a bearer or token of the mourning process.

Thus, for example, and returning to Escobar-Jaramillo's project, it is crucial to understand that each of these memorials only come to be when there is a felt need by the community; without the decided participation of the community, the project cannot go forward. Only after having carefully researched the community, engaging in long conversations with its members, and attending a day workshop with them, he requests them to gather around the bonfire. If he has not been able to secure the participation in crucial process of the community, it is a no go.

Escobar-Jaramillo follows a similar script for each of the interventions he conducts—which in fact constitute the very kernel of the project—for which one can state with confidence that the center of his practice is fueled by dialogue. It is dialogue, which permeates the whole process, which creates the process itself: to mourn the fallen ones is to try to pick up the conversation where they left it, to engage in a public dialogue—to return back to politics, that is. The mediation of bereavement should lead to the mediation of political life.

Certainly, a skeptical reader can still claim Escobar-Jaramillo is still an outsider, and that he forces the community to mourn or to pass through a process that is foreign to them. Maybe, they have not even had the urge to start the mourning process. In other words, that he is not just a catalyzer but, actually, an imposer of ideas of his own into a defenseless community.

This suspicion might be the most difficult to shake off, because there is no clear way of dispelling it, except by pointing out two obvious things: judging by their complexity, it is impossible to create the type of photographic memorials Escobar-Jaramillo exhibits without the decided participation of the community and, most importantly, the fact that Escobar-Jaramillo is an outsider does not necessarily mean that his idea was exogenous to the community and, even if that was the case, it does not mean that it was imposed or not fully embraced. Indeed, not every idea that is foreign at some point needs to be imposed to become “native”. Examining our own personal history, I think we could all agree that at some point, some of our most precious beliefs were not “ours” at some point, and we have ended up accepting them and not precisely by force but because they proved appealing: some because they were reasonable, sound, and some others because they were interesting or even challenging. Decision making theory is not inherently made of coercion or deception, as most ideologues or skeptics might think⁶.

6 For information on perhaps the most accepted theory on interpretation of the last decades, see Donald

In that sense, it is important to also have in focus that in the dialogic process with the community, Escobar-Jaramillo has two places of entry and connection with these communities which can ease them into a frank and honest dialogue with him: he too is Colombian, after all, and his family—like many others across the country has also experienced the devastation of violence, first hand. In other words: they can find a sense of belonging in their double recognition—as compatriots, and as victims of the conflict—that can be used as points of departure (and arrival) in this mourning process. Indeed, if there is something that any spectator of the memorial should take out of his/her viewing is the very yearning for taking the process of recognition and mourning into a national level —through Escobar-Jaramillo's project each of these tragedies stop being focalized, local and disconnected events and start acquiring a systematic density, to be understood as a totality. In order to really start to move on, first a strong belief that at some point the whole country was overtaken and run by the logic of violence needs to be formed.

In fact, much of the success in the future process of reconciliation would be based in the acceptance, by most members of the larger community (the nation), that the violence was not limited to just certain areas or particular disjointed episodes, but that it was systematic and simultaneous, and covered all instances of the nation's life. For that reason, and returning to the question of what might be next for the country, the process which Escobar-Jaramillo sets up in motion through this memorial should be seen as an early rehearsal, one of the first articulations, of what might become more evident as the process of national reconciliation start to be discussed in the public domain: that the effective re-founding of the nation is contingent upon the recognition that to be a Colombian and to be a victim of the conflict are equivalent concepts. In other words: the formula for the rebirth of the nation, to effectively stitching back its social tissue, may lie in the recognition of a fellow compatriot as a victim of the conflict (and viceversa).

It is for all these reasons that I have tried, deliberately, to avoid classifying Escobar-Jaramillo's project as just "art" —or even pseudo-euphemisms such as "artistic project"—because it somehow disfigures it. Certainly, there is an element of artistic practice in it —at a very basic level it might be even be classified as "just" a photographic project or, conversely, if one focuses on the ephemeral quality of the actions, as a series of "performances"—but it is not the central aspect of it. The project aims, as we have seen, are beyond

Davidson's seminal essays collected in his *Inquiries into Truth and Intrepretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

the aesthetic confines; there is a clear interest in advancing a social process not only at the level of the communities that participated in each sites of the project but, more importantly, at the level of the potential spectators of the photographs that constitute the memorial. In that sense, and just in the same way that outrage is insufficient to deal with the social issue of the country, to simply focus the description of this project in mere artistic terms also can also feel incomplete and mistaken.

But what to do then with the aesthetic stance of the project? Does it add something to it that pictures are of an arresting beauty?

I certainly do. And it is precisely for that reason that I believe that, just in the same way it is necessary but not sufficient to call “Colombia, Tierra de Luz” a strictly artistic project, it is also erroneous to not fully understand the importance of beauty in this picture—in Escobar-Jaramillo’s pictures, in the whole project—and make sense of its insistence in its “artistic” stance. In fact, maybe the problem of the description for a project such as Escobar-Jaramillo’s might not reside in its accuracy or not, but instead in the popular meaning we have of the terms of the description themselves. In other words: the problem might reside not so much in calling it “art” but in the popular conception we have of “art.”

Thus, the problem resides in that for most people art is just an epiphenomenon, with little consequence or importance outside the realm of the purely sensorial. After all, the belief goes, the realm of aesthetics is so subjective that there is hardly any benefit in discussing it with peers and friends. Thus, the popular conception of art does not contemplate any further repercussions in the daily life of anyone shaken by an aesthetic experience, as if any given encounter with the beautiful (as when one contemplates a masterpiece in a museum) or the sublime (as when one contemplates a storm or a magnificent mountain), does not have any real effect in the spectator, except for a momentary moment of pleasure.

Nonetheless, if one were to really open up the reasons behind why one is overwhelmed, shaken to the core, by the encounter with certain objects we can find “beautiful” one would understand the profound effects such a split second experience has for ourselves and for society at large. When we are addressed by a beautiful object (such as a painting, a song, a poem, etc.), and we surrender to its beauty, letting ourselves experience it fully, there is much more going on than simply a mere sensorial overload.

Take Escobar-Jaramillo’s memorial—the images that accompany this text—for instance: they are all beautiful in their own right. That is: they are all “well taken,” they show a technical mastery, making them appealing in their

dramatic compositions and use of the chiaroscuro, and each of them depicts incredible ephemeral sculptures and taken as a whole, as a series, they produce the most haunting of memorials, as we have just explained. Therefore, how come this is an aspect that has to be obliterated from our analysis? What might be the use of their beauty—isn't the story already compelling enough so the beauty is accessory?

Perhaps it will be easier to leave it to Friedrich Schiller, the great German poet and philosopher to respond for us (and for Escobar-Jaramillo) as it was up to him, some two hundred years ago, to come up with the most compelling of accounts of how the experience of beauty is actually the single most important experience for a society to engage in. As it is known, Schiller was one Kant's greatest fans of his time, in whose philosophical he found many solutions to some of the most intractable metaphysical problems. As we know too, Kantian philosophy is centered in reason: it is our capacity to reason, for Kant, which allows us to choose correctly, and impose to ourselves to have our lives, our moral life, governed by laws

Nonetheless, though swept from his feet by Kantian philosophy, Schiller was writing amidst a most complicated background: when he started to write his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), the French Revolution had gone astray and the Reign of Terror was at its height. This, of course, was a travesty for any enlightened intellectual such as Schiller: if the French Revolution embodied all the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Reign of Terror showed that, somehow, reason alone was not enough. It became utterly clear that man was something more than just a rational being for which it was too risky to leave the whole architecture of our ethical system resting on just this faculty. Man, it seems, is also pulled to his sensuous side, and is driven too by his passions, which conflicts permanently with his reasonable side; therefore, each human being is a battlefield between rationality and sensuousness. Schiller's therefore sets his philosophical inquiry in trying to find a middle ground between these two poles in which all men struggle through their life.

So, if it was Kant who made clear the connection between the aesthetic experience and the experience of freedom—one experiences freedom in that split second of awe—it was Schiller who made clear why beauty was crucial for human beings because it combined the rational and the sensuous and therefore the only true middle ground of men, and therefore, of any society⁷. If one wants to unite a society, this can only be done through the experience

7 For more information on the relation between aesthetic experience and freedom, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translation and Edition by Paul Guyer. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

of beauty because it is the only form of perception that each can receive as full human beings:

All the other forms of perception divide man, because they are exclusively based either on the sensuous or on the intellectual part of his being; only the perception of the Beautiful makes something whole of him, because both his natures must accord with it. All other forms of communication divide society, because they relate exclusively either to the private sensibility or to what distinguishes between one man and another; only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all⁸.

Judging by the images that conform the memorial, their haunting beauty, I think I might not alone in saying that Escobar-Jaramillo understood Schiller's lesson and has tried to put it into practice. Its project, is true, dangles on a thread: a thread of light he is unrolling across his country. Responding to the call to go beyond outrage, by producing a memorial of enormous beauty, there is the hope that its experience will help to put back together the still dismembered body of his society. Underneath all his efforts lies the conviction that only in the experiencing of beauty one can attain freedom, and be united with others—that at junctures such as these one, the experience of beauty might be the only effective starting point for transcending outrage.

Having seen him traverse the country all these months till exhaustion, unraveling endlessly his luminous thread across it, and stitching it with the purest of fires, I am inclined (i.e. hopeful) to say that I have been witnessing a some of the first articulations of a post-conflict Colombia. After all, no one will say that at in the heart of the heart of the country, shrouded by rain and smog, and tucked underneath all the other graffiti, the writing was not in the wall. Now we know that Escobar-Jaramillo walked pass it, and actually read it. Very soon, little by little, more and more of his compatriots will start to be grateful for that, too. ✨

8 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 138.