

Tearing Down Walls

Politics and Aesthetics in the Art of Juan Manuel Echavarría

by Thomas Girst

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
—Edgar Allan Poe, "Alone," 1829¹

Hubris. Dedalus and Icarus. Wings made of feathers, the blazing sun, the melting wax. The Fall of Icarus, an edifying example of human presumption. And then? As Dedalus buries his son, the partridge *Perdix* rejoices, clapping its wings wildly.² In its original form, as a human boy, the partridge had invented the compass and the saw, provoking the envy of his uncle Dedalus, who threw him from the Acropolis. Caught and rescued by Athena, transformed on the spot into a bird, now *Perdix* laughs at the profound grief of Dedalus, the fatal plunge of his only son.

Another example. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver shipwrecked on the beach of the Island of Lilliput, pinned to the ground by hundreds of thumb-sized people. Or pulling the midgets' entire fleet after him. Those are the main pictures that come to mind. And then? He pees on a burning palace to extinguish the fire, a giantess on Brobdingnag forces him into sexual games, and when he returns home he despises family and friends, interested (in every sense of the word) only in horses.³ They resemble the wise Houyhnhnms from the eponymous island of his adventure—the island where, incidentally, the Yahoos, primitive, ape-like creatures, pounced on him in an attempt to copulate with him.

Another example. The thirteenth century. *Il Milione*, Marco Polo's account of his journey. The great merchant: shipping, the laws of nations, warfare and transportation. All the same: Russia is little more for him than women who during all-day bacchanals have their maids sit under the tables with sponges so that they don't have to get up to do their business. And in the province of Tibet under Möngke Khan no one ever marries a virgin. Travelers passing through are offered up to forty girls to do with as they please. The young women get pieces of jewelry, and those who wear more than twenty of these keepsakes, showing how many men have had their pleasure with them, enter into wedlock. Marco Polo remarks: "It was quite worthwhile to describe this marriage custom for you, and it would be no far-fetched idea for a lad of sixteen to twenty years to visit this region."⁴

We will get to Juan Manuel Echavarría at once.

In *A Box of Matches* the American writer Nicholson Baker has paterfamilias Emmett describe the thoughts he has when he lies awake in bed at five-thirty in the morning. Thinking about what it would be like if Earth were flat and he were plummeting over the drop at the edge of the world in a speedboat, right where the horizon draws a clear line between the sea and the air. Like a plunge through Niagara Falls, it takes him through vast quantities of water and mist until, his hand firmly on the rudder, his boat smashes down on the ocean again at the other side of the world. He goes ashore to find nothing noticeably changed, eats dinner, spends the night in an abandoned motel, only to climb into the boat again the next morning and repeat the trick of the previous day to land on the real side of Earth.⁵

It is in this motel, one can safely assume, that the work of Juan Manuel Echavarría could just as well be displayed. The other side of the world: for most of us, this is Colombia. Completely unknown, uncharted territory. If the canon of our collective memory is already highly selective in regard to the content of what are considered works of world literature (as the three above examples have tried to show), then this may very well be indicative of the highly limited spectrum of our perception and knowledge of politics and history. Outside of Central and South America, Colombia—besides evoking vague associations with cocaine, drug cartels, and violence—simply does not happen.

Human Rights Watch estimates that 11,000 children are fighting in Colombia's civil war, most of them as members of the FARC, the largest of Colombia's left-wing rebel groups. The children typically join the guerillas between the ages of eleven and thirteen.⁶ In Colombia, "the main fuel of the murder

figures... is the fantastic plentitude of weaponry. A homemade gun costs just over a U.S. dollar, a hand grenade just over twelve English pounds... In Cali [bullets] cost fifty cents each, and can be sold to minors individually, like cigarettes."⁷ All in all a total of no more than 40,000 armed militants tyrannize a population of about 35 million people, up to two million of whom are displaced and on the run inside of the country—during a horrendous conflict already lasting over forty years.

In Juan Manuel Echavarría's video series *Mouths of Ash* close to a dozen people of varying age and gender were recorded singing about witnessing massacres and having become victims of forced displacement. The protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* remarks that "the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song is the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul."⁸ By singing about a devastating experience rather than speaking about it, the experience itself retains more of its immediacy, for the singer as well as for the ones who listen. Yet the songs of the singers of *Mouths of Ash* are also celebrations of survival, of having lived through the most outrageous violence. They are like Whitman's "Song of Myself" in the most original sense. It was in 1881 that Whitman added "and sing myself" to the very first line, right after the words "I celebrate myself."⁹

While *Mouths of Ash* or the series of photographs depicting details of a destroyed and abandoned school in Escuela Nueva deal with the impact of violence on and the displacement of Colombia's poorest citizens, Echavarría is careful to point out that the violence of his country cuts through every social sphere and every class. In *La María* it is the plight of kidnapped middle-class women that the artist is documenting with photographs, recorded testimonials, and a video installation—while in *Home Movie*, his most personal work to date, Echavarría focuses on his own home in Medellín—stables for breeding horses included—that he and his next of kin were forced to abandon "after kidnappings and killings struck my family."¹⁰ Yet following T. S. Eliot's tenet of a necessary separation of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" the artist rarely comments upon these private circumstances.

Martin Luther King, Jr., once pointed out that "man's inhumanity to man is not only perpetrated by the vitriolic actions of those who are bad. It is also perpetrated by the vitiating inaction of those who are good."¹¹ Through his art, Echavarría has decided to take action, and it is mostly by way of photographs and videos—put to use not only as a recording devices— that the artist involves the viewer in the violent narrative of his country. "Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed."¹² Echavarría is light-years away from a new generation of photographers using computer software to subtly manipulate images that mimic—and therefore undermine—the truth value of straight photography. When he makes human bones appear as flowers in his *Flower Vase Cut* series, takes pictures of insects collected by the kidnapped women of *La María*, or photographs badly damaged mannequins for his *Portraits* he is neither arranging objects merely for art's sake or aesthetic reasons alone¹³ nor is he following the strict ethics of non-interference imposed on a photo journalist.¹⁴ "Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what we recall of events."¹⁵ Juan Manuel Echavarría knows this. And he is an artist in search of a metaphor. Just as the painter Neo Rauch remarked of his paintings that within him he "seek[s] to capture the moment before or after a possible excess,"¹⁶ Echavarría makes the violence more virulent by not addressing it head-on but leaving the imaginative capability of the viewer to complete the creative process and fill in the blanks—the only prerequisite, it seems, would be to draw from one's own experiences of terror real or imagined to grasp the magnitude of what it is that ordinary citizens of Colombia are exposed to. Here, he is not unlike the great photographer August Sander who, though he "never swerved from suffering . . . preferred not to register it at first hand but to arrive much later and take a reading of the aftershocks."¹⁷ In addition, the use of metaphor is an essential part of Echavarría's art: "I do not believe art exists without metaphor," he proclaimed. "Metaphors are universal,"¹⁸ echoing Borges' remark that "perhaps universal history is the history of only a few metaphors."¹⁹

Just as in Diane Arbus' photographs of freaks and outcasts, the dignity of suffering humans depicted in Echavarría's video is completely restored. Yet much of what Echavarría's art hints at is what happens when dignity is being taken away, when men no longer see other men as fellow human beings but as something else, something much less—not as individuals but as a different inferior category altogether. This is the prerequisite for any war or armed conflict, for any murderous struggle and the very reason why it is possible for humans to turn against each other. And this dehumanizing of the other (even of dead bodies themselves, as Echavarría's *Flower Vase Cut* series hints at the perverse mutilations performed on enemy casualties in his country during the 1950s) is precisely what is being lamented in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of an American Slave* as much as it is in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Moralistic finger pointing would be easy, yet overtly didactic art never made it very far. There is no direct critique of U.S. involvement to be found in Echavarría's art nor a direct denouncement of one or more of the various paramilitary and guerilla groups tyrannizing Colombia. What Echavarría focuses on is the suffering of the individual: the *Mouths of Ash* singing portraits as a synecdoche of the struggle within his country, the women of *La María* as a

pars pro toto of a population confronted with violence. Echavarría is not a spokesman for an NGO [Non-governmental Organization]. His art remains tightly focused in search of the right metaphor to deal with the enormous number of displaced people in Colombia, decades of armed struggle, and the violence that surrounds the cocaine trade. He is not dealing with the tremendous pollution created by the oil industry, the daily loss of hectare upon hectare of virgin forests, the tyrannizing of trade unionists, or the forced exile of journalists and academics from Colombia. This is where the viewer of Echavarría's art may translate his interest into learning more about and reading up on the country's troubled past and current dependencies. The vague associations of the country with cocaine, drug cartels, and violence are certainly not wrong but should only be the starting point for delving deeper into the subject matter. This in itself is an enormous achievement of the art of Juan Manuel Echavarría.

There is hope, however fleeting, and it sometimes shows through at the edges of Echavarría's art. Yes, Colombia is the number-one producer of cocaine in the world but it is also the second largest exporter of flowers and the third richest country in biodiversity on the planet.²⁰ Medellín is most gruesomely affected by drug cartels yet every year the city also holds one of the world's biggest international poetry festivals. Despite their struggle and pain, the beauty of the flora and fauna of Colombia's jungles is commented upon by several kidnapped women of the La María project within their recorded testimony that is part of the artwork. The artist himself is quick to point out the newly found joy of some of the singers depicted in *Mouths of Ash*. The Hernandez brothers of *Dos Hermanos* in particular, Nacér and Dorismel, are also known to sing and play happy songs on the accordion. They breed fish, pursue their jobs, and are full of hope. True, there is an enormous amount of suffering and violence in Colombia—but the daily lives of most people there should not be viewed under these limiting aspects alone. There is happiness, joy, dignity, and a communal spirit to be found, even in the slums of Cartagena.

Susan Sontag has pointed out that "photographs of the suffering and martyrdom of a people are more than reminders of death, of failure, of victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival. To aim at the perpetuation of memories means inevitably that one has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating, memories."²¹ The suffering seems not to be in vain as it is recorded through and by the artist. Anonymous horrors, impossible to grasp, make way for specific events, places, and people. Yet how well can this work within the specific constraints of the art world?

Political art "consciously sets out to intervene (and not just reflect on) relations of power, and this necessarily means relations of power in which it exists... This intervention must be the organizing principle of the work in all its aspects, not only its 'form' and its 'content' but also its mode of production and circulation."²² From the very beginning it has been of utmost importance for Echavarría to also show inside of Colombia, to generate discussions by exhibiting in academic settings, and to remain in contact with the people depicted in *Mouths of Ash* and *La María*, among others—who he also invites to view the work they are part of, an often cathartic experience. "My art is not to decorate walls. It is to tear down walls,"²³ he once exclaimed; by carefully and deliberately choosing the institutions that show his work it becomes clear how much the artist aims to circumvent the downfalls of the art world and—as a big part of the latter—the art market.

So far as images "with the most solemn or heart-rending subject matter" are considered art, "they partake of the fate of all wall-hung or floor-supported art displayed in public spaces. That is, they are stations along a—usually accompanied—stroll. A museum or gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented on." Even if viewed in books in private—to Sontag clearly the preferred way of regarding the pain of others, "the strong emotion will become a transient one," meaning that the specificity of a recorded event will give way to "a denunciation of human cruelty, human savagery as such."²⁴

The latter should not be viewed as a disadvantage: universal understanding can only come from the study of the specific. Regarding the "stroll," Echavarría aims at circumventing the distractions by establishing a sort of semi-privacy through the darkness and relative seclusion of the spaces generally used for video installations. In fact, his *Mouths of Ash*, when displayed, can become a distraction as the songs are audible throughout the galleries long before one happens upon them. In the same vein, his *Flower Vase Cut* photographic series takes into account the varying distance of the viewer. Often displayed like precious textbook depictions of flowers (leaning against a wall unframed while arranged on a single border or framed individually with single lamps protruding from the middle of the upper border), the viewer from afar can only recognize them as such. It is only when drawing closer that one becomes aware of the use of human bones employed for their rendering. The intricacies of presenting violence in a cultural setting become clear. What certainly doesn't work in this regard is the cycle of paintings by Echavarría's fellow countryman Fernando Botero, depicting Colombia's war in horrific details as well as scenes from the torture scandal evolving around the mistreatment of Iraqis by U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. The impact of the original photographs of Abu Ghraib cannot be surpassed by an artistic rendering that also makes use of the painter's signature curvaceous bodies.

Walter Benjamin, as early as 1931—and thus five years prior to his taking on the aura, the uniqueness and originality of a work of art in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”—very much challenged the dominating concepts of photographic production in his “Short History of Photography.” He argued for the authenticity of the photograph—not to be confused with the exact depiction of reality—that calls for an explanation rather than an association of what it is that we are seeing, for the precise rather than the vague.²⁵ “Photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.”²⁶

Escuela Nueva, Mouths of Ash and La María may all bring to mind the subject matter of Goya’s *Desastres de la Guerra*, especially the titles of two of his etchings from the same series, the “Yo lo vi” and “Y esto también.” Like Echavarría’s work, they possess a similar intensity and knowledge of terror. Possibly with the slight difference that Goya’s graphic works, despite their titles, are an artistic rendering rather than a minute recording or testimonial of what the artist saw and experienced. Which, as Susan Sontag remarked, “hardly disqualifies” Goya’s images, which claim that “things like this happened,” whereas “in contrast, a single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera’s lens.”²⁷ The Colombians of Echavarría’s Mouths of Ash series metaphorically elevate their personal experiences to a song. The viewer of and listener to these testimonials is left with imagining what has happened by blending the synaesthetic scenario unfolding on the screen: taking in the tune and lyrics, studying the mimical expressions, registering the often trembling voice and reading the few contextualizing sentences superimposed on the silent faces at the end of each song. “To live is also to pose,”²⁸ Sontag reminds us, yet the modest manner of the recordings, the unmoving zoomed-in camera and the neutral setting before a white background all strive for the most straightforward rendering possible under the circumstances.

“To those who plan battles—to those who lead battles—to war enthusiasts of all countries—this book is dedicated.” Thus reads the first page of Ernst Friedrich’s *War against War* of 1924, which contains the most horrendous photographs of World War I battlefields and wounded soldiers in an attempt—proven futile only fifteen years later—to showcase the horrors vis-à-vis the glorification of armed conflict and thus never again to fall into the obvious trap of war. Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* of 1929 aims for the same in writing and so does Picasso’s *Guernica* of 1937 in the medium of painting. Numerous examples followed since; all of them are in the company of the art of Juan Manuel Echavarría where Roland Barthes’ *studium* and *punctum* become one, where the normative and objective meaning of an image falls together with its individual specificity and unpredictability.²⁹ Thomas Girst is Cultural Director of BMW and resides in Germany.

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¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, (New York: Penguin, 1986), 7.

² Ovid, *Metamorphosen*, Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 2001 (2-8 B.C.), 225-228.

³ The Yahoos behave like humans while the horse-like Houyhnhnms have ideal human characteristics. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, New York: Penguin, 1994 (1726), 124, 295, 321.

⁴ Marco Polo, *Il Milione: Die Wunder der Welt*, Zürich: Manesse, 1997 (1298-99), 418, 182-83 (translated from the German).

⁵ Nicholson Baker, *A Box of Matches*, New York: Vintage/Random House, 2004 (2003) 65-67.

⁶ See: “It’s not how they say it is,” *Harper’s Magazine* 310, 1858 (March 2005) 20.

⁷ From “Violence in Colombia,” an excerpt of Martin Amis’ account of Cali’s urban slums for *The Times* of London, in: *The New York Times* (The Week in Review), Sunday, February 20, 2005, 10.

⁸ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, London: Vintage, 2000 (1999), 4.

⁹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, New York: Penguin, 1986 (1855) 25 (see also xxxiii).

¹⁰ See Juan Manuel Echavarría, “Home Movie,” *European Media Art Festival: Osnabrück 2003* [exh. cat.] 199.

¹¹ Quoted by: Nicholas D. Kristof, “The American Witness,” *The New York Times / SueddeutscheZeitung*, Monday, March 14, 2005, 2.

¹² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Penguin, 2003, 21.

¹³ Compare for ex. Catherine Chalmers' photographs of insects, which appear to have been taken for reasons of mere sensation and spectacle alone (Catherine Chalmers, *American Cockroach*, New York: Aperture, 2004).

¹⁴ In this regard it is interesting to note that it is photographs of a painted cow and a starving horse which both bear the title *Witness* within Echavarría's oeuvre. It goes without saying that the term, as it is mostly used within the judicial or journalistic profession ("eyewitness"), would never qualify animals as such.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, "The Photographs Are Us," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004 (Section 6), 24-29, 42.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Thomas Girst, "The Parallel Universe of Neo Rauch," *Tema Celeste XVIII*, 86 (July/September 2001) 60-63.

¹⁷ Anthony Lane in an article on August Sander, *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2003, 96.

¹⁸ "Conversations with Juan Manuel Echavarría," Hans-Michael Herzog (ed.) *Cantos/Cuentos Colombianos: Contemporary Colombian Art*, Zürich: Daros-Latinamerica, 175-201.

¹⁹ Quoted from: "Die Sphäre Pascals," Jorge Luis Borges, *Inquisitionen: Essays*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992, 15-18 (translated from the German). André Malraux's *Voices of Silence* of 1951, with a chapter entitled "Museum without Walls" depicting 638 illustrations, also proves an ambitious account of the universally interconnected realm of art and culture.

²⁰ These facts and those quoted in the previous paragraph were mostly compiled by Erna von der Walde, for a wall text installation during a symposium about the current situation in Colombia at the *Kunsthaus Zürich* held at the opening of *Cantos/Cuentos Colombianos: Contemporary Colombian Art (Part II)*, January 29 – April 17, 2005, Daros-Latinamerica, Zürich. I thank Ms. von der Walde for making this compilation available to me for this article.

²¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Penguin, 2003, 78.

²² The artist Andrea Fraser quoted in Gregg Borowitz, "Tactics Inside and Out," *Artforum XLIII*, 1(September 2004), 212-215, 292.

²³ Conversation with the artist, Cali, Colombia, February 13, 2003.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Penguin, 2003, 108-09.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Fotografie," Wolfgang Kemp (ed.), *Theorie der Fotografie II: 1912-1945*, Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1979, 200-12.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Penguin, 1973, 185.

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Penguin, 2003, 42.

²⁸ Susan Sontag, "The Photographs Are Us," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004 (Section 6), 24-29, 42.

²⁹ For an extended discussion on the subject, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981 (1980).