

# Juan Manuel Echavarría

by Ana Tiscornia

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What is new about Auschwitz is not mass murder, says Imre Kertész, “but the continuous elimination of human beings carried out methodically for years and decades, and thus converted into a system in which, in the meantime, daily and quotidian life unfolds normally; children are educated, amorous walks taken, an hour with the doctor, professional ambitions and other desires, civil aspirations, crepuscular melancholy, success, failure, etc. This, in addition to the fact of getting used to the situation, accustomed to fear and resignation, indifference and even boredom, is a new and even very recent invention. What is new in it, to be precise, is the following: it is accepted.”<sup>1</sup>

It is unfortunate that what Kertész finds surprising in Auschwitz is in fact a global reality in contemporary culture. Recognizing this fact, however, does not guarantee its understanding, and understanding, that is to say, interpreting it, is not so easy. Even though it might be the most important ethical imperative before us (since by understanding we could cease to accept and thus find mechanisms to disarticulate the systematization of this horror), understanding, from the present, is a complex operation. It implies admitting uncertainty, renouncing Enlightenment theories such as the universality of concepts like progress, and allowing for contradiction.

Quantum and chaos theories taught us to measure in relative terms, and nowadays admitting doubt is obligatory. Hence the argument that intellectuals are now reluctant to make any moral distinction between “good” and “bad,” and that they have forfeited their legitimating role in what “should be” to assume a more distant one as presenters of what “appears to be.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, does renouncing this position of arbiter cultivated by modern intellectuals, recognizing that perception is conditioned by multiple incidental factors, and inevitably and deviously fashioned by the system it inhabits, imply the fatal rupture of any social contract by the intellectual? Does accepting that reality is the sum total of “language games”<sup>3</sup> that cannot be articulated into one totalizing explanation necessarily force us to renounce the search for a minimum ethical common denominator that may sustain dialogue within difference?

Artists now know that their constructions will, perforce, be unstable. That is to say, unfinished, surrendered to the legitimating forces of art that in and of themselves create meaning, a meaning that frequently distorts the work’s content. But if the immediate reality of the artist is that of a country like Colombia, plagued with violence, then it would seem that the answers to these questions become, if not clearer, then every day more urgent. Because the question that claims primacy is: How contingent is the right to life?

When Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría decided more than a decade ago to part with literature<sup>4</sup> and began taking photographs, he barely perceived that he was beginning to elucidate these questions. He believed that he was exchanging a language whose narrative linearity pushed him towards fiction for one that allowed him a more direct relationship to reality through the immediate nature of the image. But it was not the necessity of a direct relation to reality that proved to be essential in this crisis (in the end his photographs and videos are constructed situations), but that the image as a symbolic product revealed another issue: that what Echavarría was finding within himself was an ethical link with his surroundings. That is why today, when he looks back towards the beginning, he says, “My photography led me to want to plunge deeper into my country and confront the present we live... it made me center on the social problem of Colombia and took me down a far more conscious path, from which there is no turning back to an art in which fantasy and mythical times prevail.”<sup>5</sup>

Just like Imre Kertész, Echavarría believes that acceptance is a dimension of the Colombian problem. “I was born in 1947. We have not had a single year of peace since then. There has been an ongoing civil war in Colombia. In 1950 it was the political struggle between Liberals and Conservatives throughout rural Colombia. The [Catholic] church also took part in the conflict. The clergy belonged to the Conservative Party and used the pulpit to say that Liberals were sons of the devil, and thus massacres were justified. Many in the paramilitary and guerrilla forces come from families that were victims of this violence. The point is that this recurring cycle, this vicious circle of violence, has become normal.”<sup>6</sup>

The press may have something to do with this “normalization.” According to Echavarría, the Colombian media “have transformed sensationalism into routine. Through photo journalism and television newscasts... we have been anaesthetized by this sensationalism.”<sup>7</sup> It is precisely by recognizing this factor, the role of the image in the construction of our surroundings, that the complexity and delicacy of an operation that seeks to construct a direct relationship to reality through visual constructs becomes evident.

The first series of photographs made by Echavarría in 1996, *Retratos* (Portraits), is a twopronged encounter between visual metaphors, since there is a simultaneous depiction of violence and “normalization” (which is normal and norm at the same time) in Colombian daily life.

Echavarría photographs a number of broken and dilapidated mannequins standing on a sidewalk near clothing stores. Curiously, the mannequins are used to exhibit and sell garments without their being fixed. The lacerated, broken, and battered body goes unnoticed in Colombia. Is it necessary then to appeal to the critical, reflexive, and sustained gaze through an absolute aestheticism? This question, framed almost inadvertently in this first series, becomes an argument as Echavarría advances in his artistic production.

The “aesthetics of violence” to which he consciously turns in his second series *Corte de Florero* (Flower Vase Cut, 1997), is a strategy of seduction, anti-shock, and anti-voyeurism, that seeks to persuade the spectator to see reality and look at him or herself without actually seeing it. Even though in his bid for beauty he does not hide a certain hope in the redemptive qualities of art, Echavarría locates himself within the contemporary debate on the merit or lack thereof, of aesthetic pleasure and its possibilities for reconciliation with a critical perspective.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, he ventures into aestheticism because of its ambivalence and the possibility of hiding horror within false appearances.

This is evident in *Corte de Florero*, a series of thirty-six finely produced photographs that appear to be plates from a botanical expedition notebook. Careful observation shows them to be perturbing images of human bones set to look like floral arrangements. In them, the taxonomical classification that defines a real genus of Colombian flowers has been associated with adjectives invented by the artist that denote the horror of the mutilations they refer to.

Echavarría explores here the practices of *LA VIOLENCIA* (1948-1964) and their representation. The mutilations that constituted its visual language<sup>9</sup> are commonly known as *Los Cortes* (The Cuts): *de Franela* (the Vest), *de Corbata* (the Necktie), *de Mica* (the Chamber Pot), and *de Florero* (the Flower Vase), according to the way in which the body was manipulated and the code used for rearranging the bodily parts. In the *Florero*, the head is removed and the remaining orifice is stuffed with the legs and arms of the victim, just like flowers in a vase.

In opting to simulate botanical plates, Echavarría condenses numerous and diverse factors that come together in Colombian history and its genealogy of violence. On one hand, flowers are an important source of revenue for Colombia and are one of its main exports. Their representation alludes to their economic role as part of the socio-cultural framework in which the violence is inscribed. On the other, the flowers are a rubric marking the entry of Enlightenment ideas through the botanical expeditions conducted at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. One of these provided inspiration for Echavarría’s work: The *Real Expedición Botánica* (Royal Botanical Expedition) led by José Celestino Mútis in the Kingdom of New Granada. The event brought with it the scientific point of view that would confront the predominantly religious criteria that were the norm during Colonial times, ultimately providing a basis for the processes of independence. Nevertheless, it is also here that the cycle of interminable wars also began.

As Ana María Reyes points out, by revisiting the Colonial period, this piece provides a critical perspective on this time, suggesting that the origins of violence might be found before 1948 in Colonial practices whose history has been repressed. “By establishing a conversation between the present and the historic past... he evokes in the viewer a collective trauma with historical continuity that filters down into the present.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, flowers in general symbolize passive principles. “A flower’s corolla is like the cup, the receptacle of celestial activity, symbolized also by rain and dew.”<sup>11</sup> The tension between the active principle of violence and the passive one of flowers involves the spectator in his or her own passivity. This reflexivity also appears when the frequent use of botanical plates as decoration, as well as the no less frequent use of art, is analyzed.

*Cuadernos de Chicocóra* (Notebooks from Chicocóra, 1998) is another project taken up by Echavarría after passing through a deserted hamlet of palm-thatched wooden houses whose inhabitants have fled in horror from a paramilitary incursion. Amongst the ruins of the “*Escuela Nueva*” (New School)—the name of an educational project in Colombia turned paradoxical given the circumstances—appeared these notebooks, “footprints of the

invisible children trapped in the insatiable violence of the drug trade."<sup>12</sup> Echavarría rescues and photographs them, decontextualized, using a white backdrop that refocuses our gaze on their candidness interwoven with hopeless reality. The word *co* (coconut) transposed into *coca* (short for cocaine) in one of the photographed pages appears as a revelatory clue to the presence of illegal drugs in Colombian society.

Children are inadvertent witnesses, that is, in their bare innocence they witness. Just like *El Testigo* (The Witness, 1998), an emaciated, phantasmagoric white horse photographed standing at the center of an extensive, solitary landscape. This black and white photograph is the "fourth horse of the Apocalypse."<sup>13</sup> This presage of death stares fixedly at the spectator's eyes, interrogating us without waiting for an answer. The horse that obsessed the artistic imagination, an animal of darkness and clairvoyant power, has also been associated with the unconscious; "only he can pass with impunity through the gates of mystery into reason."<sup>14</sup>

It is the image of this horse, the first living presence in Echavarría's photographs, that nevertheless is also death incarnate; the imaginary that influenced his literature is brought to the foreground. Contextualizing the animal in a desolate landscape that is practically devoid of all information, as well as the use of black and white, also stem from this appreciation.

By contrast, the *Cuadernos de Chicocóora* makes use of color in an attempt to bring up a more immediate and realist presence. Yet the use of color does not always imply the reduction of symbolic mediation, as exemplified by Echavarría's videos.

His first video production, *La Bandeja de Bolívar: 1999* (Bolívar's Platter: 1999, 1999),<sup>15</sup> establishes a paradoxical parallel between Colombia's emergence as an independent nation and its destruction at the hands of the national and international webs of the illegal drug trade. A replica of the porcelain tray inscribed with "República de Colombia para siempre" (Republic of Colombia forever) commemorating independence that was given to Bolívar is broken into pieces until it becomes a small mound of powder that unequivocally brings to mind cocaine.

It is interesting to note that the use of video appears to indicate the necessity of going back to that form of narrative development from which Echavarría separated himself during his artistic beginnings. To date, his three video productions are characterized by a minimum use of resources. The visual synthesis of *La Bandeja de Bolívar:1999* was followed by *Guerra y Pa* (War and Peace, 2001)<sup>16</sup>, another caricature of the slippage between politics and reality. The first case depicted the unhappy trajectory of a national project, while the second treated the rhetoric of peace processes.

Two parrots were trained during eight months to be the protagonists of this nine-minute video. One learned to repeat the word *guerra* (war) and the other said *pa* (pea, literally), using the pronunciation of the Colombian Caribbean. "Fortunately, Bonifacio Pacheco's pronunciation (the parrot trainer) allowed me to understand that peace is, and always will be, an incomplete concept for human beings," says Echavarría.<sup>17</sup>

The parrots appear on screen standing on a cruciform perch, screaming *pa* and *guerra* while they fight and change positions on this cross/perch. "The idea came directly from television, from the newscasts in which you could hear the politicians and guerrilla bosses endlessly repeat, parrot-like, war and peace."<sup>18</sup>

The video parodies peace negotiation processes, a theme that has led to the appearance of similar works in diverse countries, among them the famous performance by Mona Hatoum, *The Negotiation Table*, in 1983. As Hans Herzog correctly points out, regardless of the argument, "This video functions as a metaphor for all conflicts and social relations between human beings."<sup>19</sup> It is precisely this immediate fabric of human experience that Echavarría probes in his third video *Bocas de Ceniza* (Mouths of Ash, 2003-04) and in his photographic series of *La María* (2000).

While in the latter project he uses objects as a way of depicting experience, in the video it is the subjects who are in charge of narrating it through song. *La María* is an almost documentary piece transformed into a metaphor. It portrays the experience of eight women and three men who were kidnapped from a church in Cali, a city in southwest Colombia, during Sunday mass.

Echavarría interviewed seven of these women, who narrated their misadventures while they were captive in the jungle. The survival strategies of the group included collecting, recognizing, classifying, and admiring insects, as well as engraving small rocks. The insects, stored in plastic cassette-tape boxes, were photographed by Echavarría, decontextualizing them through the use of a white backdrop, just like the *Cuadernos de Chicocóora*, thus transforming them into portraits of captivity and exercises in salvation.

"On a given Ash Wednesday, during the beginning of Lent and moving up river along the Magdalena River, the Spanish entered Colombia. The day became a pretext for the name Bocas de Ceniza (Mouths of Ash), which they gave to their point of access: the mouth of the river. Penitence and resurrection have forever marked this geographical point. Today, the Magdalena River's current takes and provides a way out for the bodies of many Colombians killed in these interminable episodes of violence. Colombians that die and are never resurrected."<sup>20</sup> Echavarría, nevertheless, chose this title for a video that focuses close-up on the faces of eight survivors of massacres who sing their histories.

These individuals, whose faces reflect an undoubtedly painful life, sing, contrary to what is expected, without rancor. Paradoxically, they thank God for something that may easily go uncomprehended by the spectator, conscious of the unfolding drama. But the purpose of the camera that so closely looks at these beings is not rational understanding, but instead the construction of a loving closeness that brings to mind the gaze demanded by many of the photographs taken by Dianne Arbus.

The representation of any human drama runs the risk of trivializing it, and Echavarría is always on the alert to this possibility. This is why, even though he looks closely, he does not search for a documentary-like fidelity in these faces but rather what is behind them and unrepresentable. This, his only piece with a direct human presence, imposes on us a gaze that is impossible to meet in reality, and that through the use of song involves the spectator in an intimate experience with these protagonists.

This emotionally charged piece is followed by the photographic series N N (2004) (literally John Doe, in Spanish the initials for No Name) where Echavarría again takes up the intermediation offered by mannequins. He constructs metaphors about the disappearance of human beings, acting like a forensic expert inspecting fragment by fragment this plaster that has been cut and battered, the paint faded, torn, and erased. Again we see pictorial qualities in this series of digital photographs, but these bring to mind the work of Antonio Tàpies. The search for traces, for scars on matter, leads him to the unformed.

The association should not surprise us, given that Tàpies produced most of his pieces within the context of Franco's regime in Spain. Sadly then, history repeats itself while "in the meantime, daily and quotidian life unfolds normally; children are educated, amorous walks taken, an hour with the doctor, professional ambitions and other desires, civil aspirations, crepuscular melancholy, success, failure..."

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<sup>1</sup> Imre Kertész. Un instante de silencio en el paredón. El Holocausto como cultura (Ensayo de Hamburgo), cited by Carina Blixen in "Libro de Imre Kertész. Reflexiones de un sobreviviente," Brecha, Septiembre 5, 2003, Montevideo, Uruguay.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Ward comments on the topic in Postmodernism, Contemporary Books, New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> The expression was coined by Jean-François Lyotard.

<sup>4</sup> Before his shift into the visual arts, Echavarría published a novel titled La gran catarata inspired by Greek mythology and a compilation of short stories, Moros en la costa, influenced by Spanish Colonial narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Correspondence with the author, October 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Juan Manuel Echavarría, interview with Calvin Reid for Bomb, Winter 2000, New York.

<sup>7</sup> JME interview with Calvin Reid.

<sup>8</sup> On this debate see Art Journal, Summer 2004, where Arthur Danto, Alexander Alberro, and Margaret Iversen have essays on the subject.

<sup>9</sup> These cuts are extensively documented in the book Matar, rematar y contramatar by the anthropologist and scholar of violence María Victoria Uribe, published by Ed. Centro de Investigaciones y Educación Popular-CINEP, Colombia. 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Ana María Reyes in her essay "Disrupting the Sensationalistic Gaze. Juan Manuel Echavarría's Photographic Reflections on Violence in Colombia" analyzing the Bocas de ceniza. Bogotá, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Chevalier y Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, Editorial Herder, Barcelona, Fifth Edition, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence with author.

<sup>13</sup> JME in an interview with Calvin Reid.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Chevalier y Alain Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos*, Editorial Herder, Barcelona, Fifth Edition, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> The first version of the piece was photographic and was used to make the video.

<sup>16</sup> Translator's Note: In the original, "peace" is Spanish (Paz) appears as Pa, that is, unfinished.

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence with author.

<sup>18</sup> Correspondence with author.

<sup>19</sup> Cited by Juan Manuel Echavarría in correspondence with author.