Ways of Making Worlds:

Narrative and Technological Devices in the Work of Clemencia Echeverri

True Fictions

In recent years, documentary recording has made powerful inroads in a number of artistic institutions. Its temporal and narrative density, its grammar packed with testimonials, information, and contextual references, managed to impact the privileged realm of pure spatiality and disinterested gaze baptized by Irish theorist Brian O'Doherty as the "White Cube"[1]. This unexpected irruption contaminated a field that presented itself as aseptic and neutral. The historical, political, and social experience impregnated in the situated audiovisual narrative established a different relationship with art audiences, much closer to their everyday reality and to the languages acquired as inhabitants of a society configured by technological means, such as cinema, television, and computer networks.

However, this type of documentary recording –at the heart of numerous photographs, installations, and contemporary videos– appears distanced from the traditional practice of cinematographic documentary, mainly in one crucial way: it does not pretend to be a complete explanation of the event it represents. Indeed, the customary omniscient voice of the documentary narrative cedes to the accumulation or juxtaposition –frequently incomplete and fragmentary– of specific situations, characters, and settings presented as pieces of a puzzle which the viewer must put together.

Clemencia Echeverri's work can be framed within the general guidelines of this trend insofar as the singularity of her proposal is not neglected. Her videos and video installations, imbued with ancestral traditions, social idiosyncrasies, and her country's recent painful political history, incorporate audiovisual recordings and testimonials that endow them with a sensibility rooted in the real world. These materials are the starting point for a cultural interrogation that requires certain links with reality, however problematic these links may be. We know that the truth is elusive, that reality is difficult to apprehend, and that all representation can be questioned, but this does not stand in the way of approximations, personal perceptions, the confrontation of dubious truths, realities, and representations, or poetic research.

Echeverri's work travels these paths from her own perspective, that of the artist. Her images, plastic devices, spatialities, and voices immerse us in experiences, situations, and events that invite us to rethink the world in which we live from a both a critical and emotional perspective.

One of her most remarkable poetic procedures is the recurrence of ellipses, fissures, hiatuses. The events or information that constitute the nucleus of her works almost always elude or hinder access to certain core instances: we observe the preparations for a ceremony involving roosters and dizzy men waving machetes, but we never fully observe what actually happens (*Juegos de herencia / Heritage Games* - 2008-2009); we witness a raid on a rural home but know nothing about the intentions that justify the action (*Sobervivencias / Survival* - 2013); we hear the voices of guerrillas and paramilitaries talking about dreadful events but can barely understand what they're saying or identify who is speaking (*Versión libre / Spontaneous Declaration*, 2011). This narrative "void" prevents a frenzy of explanations and invites us to linger in the surroundings, in the details that seemed superfluous, in the rhetoric of the artistic scaffolding itself. As is true of the effects of the Baroque –which Cuban poet Severo Sarduy analyzed so brilliantly–, there is an elision of "the essential" that troubles and sustains us in an uncertainty with no apparent end.[2]

This insistence on the unintelligible, on the elliptical, on what is not shown or said, intensifies questions regarding meaning and lays them in the spectator's lap. In fact, Clemencia Echeverri's productions require a public willing to put into practice their significant knowledge: knowledge, evocations, interpretations, memories. The majority of her installations refer to the Colombian context, to circumstances that have marked the collective memory, to native geographies and resilient traditions. However, as in the work of many contemporary artists, these local elements take on poetic dimensions that project them beyond their immediate surroundings and allow them to find an echo in a wider audience.

The open and elliptical structure of Echeverri's video installations could be compared to the work of Chantal Akerman, although the former deals with more specific social and cultural events. Her research on topics firmly rooted in the Colombian context places her more in line with authors such as Walid Raad, Kutlug Ataman, or Shirin Neshat, who have successfully translated the particularities of their cultural environments into observations about the

complexity of the world. Echeverri's work is perhaps, therefore, closer to that of artists who do not necessarily use electronic formats, such as Teresa Margolles or Regina José Galindo. Like them, Echeverri explores the painful feelings that spring from a violence that seems to be burned into in the social fabric of her country.

Off-Center Narratives

Most of Clemencia Echeverri's works have been developed in a single technological format: the multi-channel video installation. This formal structure, which involves the simultaneous emission of various video streams in an open space (which can usually be traversed), has characteristics that not only link it to our fragmented contemporary visual environment, but also stimulate the production of heterogeneous and off-center environments in which the viewer plays a fundamental role.

In these contexts, narrative temporality is disconnected from the linearity of standard classical narratives such as literature, theater, or cinema; there is no rigidly established beginning and end. Not only because the circularity of the projections (the loop) merges the beginnings and ends of the videos –making their ends imperceptible–, but also, and perhaps mainly, because the viewer can enter and leave the space at any time, with no need to coincide with the duration of the audiovisual segments.

The cyclical cadence, constant and repetitive, that mocks chronological sequentially induces one to lose track of time. It creates a temporality of its own, which is detached from that which governs our everyday lives. The videos' incessant reiteration inscribes their images and sounds with greater power, creating at the same time an intensification of the audiovisual experience. It is the viewer, however, who decides how much time to devote to the experience, making it impossible to determine how "long" the video installation lasts. Because it is impossible to establish when the videos begin or end, and therefore their duration, these pieces invite us to forsake the ways in which we commonly organize our time and enter into its circumstances, in open and uncertain ways.

In *Juegos de herencia / Heritage Games* (2008-2009) this characteristic is exploited in a unique way. Eight screens alternate key moments from an initiation rite while images of the initiates, the community preparing them for the ritual, and the animals involved in the ceremony continue to play. This recurrent circularity reinforces the continuity of the customary rite and draws the spectator into the repetitive ceremonial cadence. Upon entering the room, the spectator is placed inside the event itself, as if one of its protagonists; the overhead projector that casts the image of the rooster's head on the floor reinforces this sensation. Each screen has, in turn, a rhythm of its own, which captures the visitor's gaze in a different way. The reiterations, the cadences, and the visual rhythms, in addition to the non-referential sound, place the viewer inside an environment with its own autonomous logic, oblivious to the usual mechanisms of social life.

Echeverri's video installations build decentralized and plurivocal spaces inhabited by simultaneous visual, textual, and sound sources, which most of the time do not coincide to create a unified product. As in other areas of daily life –the Internet, social networks, television systems, etc.– the public is faced with a tangle of stimuli that he must sort out for himself. To do so, he must be both intellectually and physically involved: he must travel through the space, seek the proper points of view, and establish connections between different audiovisual sources. His movements take on the characteristics of an exploration: his trajectory within the piece will determine the relationship he establishes with it, as well as the interpretations and the meanings that may emerge.

Unlike cinema, where immobility immerses the viewer in a state of external and passive contemplation, these video installations drag one to the very center of the scene. In *Sacrificio / Sacrifice* (2013), for example, the spectator is drawn into a group of projections showing a herd of restless cows threatened by an undefined conflagration. The strategy employed forces the spectator to become part of the herd and to identify with the vacillations and perplexity of the endangered animals. At other times, visitors can choose their location with respect to the situations and characters that populate an installation, although this doesn't always guarantee that he or she will find a suitable place. In *Voz / Voice* (2006), the testimonies of incarcerated individuals flood the structure of the exhibition space. The viewer can move freely around the room and search for the best listening sites, but the multiplicity of voices distributed

throughout the room frustrates any attempt at comprehensive listening. There is no location from which all voices can be heard. The experience is necessarily incomplete, offering no possibility of accessing the innumerable complex life stories of the people whose testimonies have contributed to the installation's substrate sound.

A Piece Tailor-Made for the Observer

The spectator's movements inside these video installations set off an activity that could be called *performative editing*[3]. Upon encountering the piece, the viewer decides which videos he will see, selects the order in which he will observe the screens and the amount of time he will dedicate to each one, thus creating his own edit and a unique work. No one else could appreciate it in exactly the same way without making an identical tour of the room, choosing the same sections of video in the same order, and spending the same amount of time with each of them. This is impossible, not only because of the improbability of two people behaving in the same way, but also because all video installations vary from minute to minute. Even the same person will witness different versions of a work of this type if he enters it at different times.

The spatial configuration in *Nóculo* (2015) enhances this property, since the videos in the installation cannot be viewed simultaneously from any point of view. A large cube located in the middle of an empty room offers four autonomous projections, which only interrelate through the links between them established by the viewer. The images are revealed as the viewer walks around the space and sound invades the room, constructing its own sonic atmosphere. The audiovisual fragments are particularly enigmatic, as if to urge the spectator to build open, poetic, metaphorical associations. There is no spatial or temporal starting point, or any instructions regarding obligatory or suggested ways to view the work; the spectator's decisions are law. The momentary choices of each visitor shape the audiovisual event, as well as its sense and narrative. The artist offers stimuli, scenes, climates, signs, possibilities, but it is the viewer, by organizing all these materials according to his will, who constructs the narrative sequentiality that crystallizes into individual meaning.

Video installations are narrative devices, but also tools for agency. Viewers must make their own internal decisions that imply effects and consequences. Each time we choose to look at a

particular screen, or make a particular tour of the installation, we abandon other possibilities that would have presented us with other information, meanings, or experiences. These decisions are often unconscious, and sometimes induce reflections on ethical perspective or responsibility.

In *Treno* (2007), the viewer enters a room containing a pair of projections that face one another[4]. The space is configured so that they cannot be viewed simultaneously; to view one or the other requires a constant turning of the head or the entire body. At times, the images in the two projections are similar –a turbulent, constantly flowing river– and a change in perspective does not provide much additional information. But suddenly we see part of a person scooping out bits of clothing carried along by the current and we hear names being shouted: What attitude will the viewer take? Will he go in search of this character or turn his back? The piece refers to a well-known Colombian phenomenon, to forced disappearances, and to bodies thrown into the river. Although this is fiction, being caught up in this situation, deciding whether to face it or turn our back, provokes emotional and symbolic resonances that transcend the artistic event to impact political consciousness and introspective examination.

It should be noted that not all of Echeverri's video installations operate in the same manner. Often, the screens are set up to allow viewers to observe them simultaneously, from a privileged point of view, with no need to move through the space. The simultaneous screening of different videos can emphasize the multiplying or fragmentary effect of contemporary narratives, or, on the contrary, projections can be combined to visually prolong them, or establish differentiated rhythms between them in order to enhance certain visual effects. In *Supervivencias / Survival* (2013), for example, there is a moment in which three screens are timed to display a single vast and majestic landscape, and other moments –mainly, when individuals invading a house appear– in which six images with varying dynamics and rhythms cause nervousness and disorientation. The frontal point of view favors standardized narrative readings –in the classical Aristotelian sense requiring a beginning, a development, and a conclusion–, although the viewer's choice of where to begin and end the experience tends to relativize this type of enunciation.

Finally, the viewer's implication through the use of his body deserves another reflection, as, in a way, he grants a certain physical substratum to a medium that is, to a large extent, immaterial. The video installations are usually large empty spaces populated by spectral images and sounds of unidentified origin. The viewer's presence gives body, literally, to these productions, transforming them into true sensory or emotional experiences. Artists take into account the corporal factor when configuring their proposals, although often in an indirect or not so evident manner, through the volume of sounds, the lighting used to guide visitors' steps, or, on the contrary, darkness that makes viewers vacillate during their course.

In *Versión libre / Spontaneous Declaration* (2011), the viewer's body is interpellated by a group of individuals that seem to be headed straight at him. We watch as they approach, speak, attempt to reveal themselves, make eye contact. The interrelation is especially intense because of the way the video forces us to stand in front of them, that is, to face them. And to sustain the interpellation of these social subjects is, to an extent, to confront their stories, histories, and circumstances. The dispersion of the screens, which cannot be viewed simultaneously, means that, while we are involved with one of the characters, we feel the presence of all the others, of the density of the group to which they belong. Through this aural and spatial configuration, the work provokes an uncomfortable, stinging empathy that makes it impossible for the spectator to remain indifferent.

Clemencia Echeverri employs all these resources to construct an incisive, powerful work that is attentive, thoughtful, and deeply rooted in its social and epochal context. This essay has dealt with only a few of the artist's technical and enunciative strategies, leaving its semantic and political connotations to other specialists, or to the spectator. We know that it is impossible to deal with the totality of an artist's production; not only impossible, but also useless and unnecessary, because Echeverri continues to strengthen her work, exploring resources and researching concepts, materialities, and forms. These lines, therefore, are presented as a humble introduction to what already exists, to the momentary foundations of a work under construction.

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Notes

[1] Brian O'Doherty (2000). *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* Los Angeles: University of California Press (Spanish version: *Dentro del cubo blanco. La ideología del espacio expositivo.* Murcia: Cendeac, 2011).

[2] Severo Sarduy (1987). *General Essays on the Baroque.* Buenos Aires: FCE.

[3] I develop this concept in certain texts in my book: Rodrigo Alonso (2015), *Elogio de la low-tech. Historia y estética del arte tecnológico en América Latina (Praise for the Lo-Tech: History and Aesthetics of Technological Art in Latin America)* Buenos Aires: Luna Editores.

[4] Other versions of this work use more than two screens, but they operate similarly.