

Democracy Cycle–An Interview with Carlos Motta

Stefanie Kogler

Carlos Motta (Colombia/USA) conducts far-reaching projects that question and re-examine democracy in its current form. He further focuses his projects on the role of democracy in the Latin American context. *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice* (2010) (Fig.1), *Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament* (2011) (Fig.2) and *La buena vida/The Good Life* (2005-2008) (Fig.3) form the varying points of departure for this interview.¹



Fig.1 *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice*, 2010, six-channel video installation, 50 min., colour, sound. Installation views at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Y Gallery, New York.

¹ The interview was conducted via Skype on the 17th of October 2012.



Fig.2 *Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament*, 2011, two-channel video installation, 32 min., colour, sound. Installation views at Y Gallery, New York.
Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Y Gallery, New York.



Fig.3 *La buena vida/ The Good Life*, 2005-2008, twelve-channel video installation, approx. 60 min., colour, sound. Installation views at San Francisco Art Institute.
Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Y Gallery, New York.

Stefanie Kogler (SK): The three projects we are talking about here present us with a critique of democracy in Latin America. They begin in varying fields, such as electoral politics in Colombia during the 2010 presidential elections (*Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice*), Religion and Liberation Theology since the 17th Century (*Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament*) and the individual and subjective views of people in Latin America regarding democracy and foreign intervention between the years 2005 and 2008 (*La buena vida/The Good Life*). Can you talk us through the points of convergence between these projects and the ideas behind them?

Carlos Motta (CM): The three projects you mentioned above, as well as, *The Immigrant Files: Democracy Is Not Dead; It Just Smells Funny* (2009) (Fig.4), approach the concept of democracy from the perspective of 'marginal' social groups and make visible a set of nuanced critiques of democracy, which have been historically repressed by the mainstream. I am interested in how citizens and organized social movements both perceive and enact political processes.



Fig.4 *The Immigrant Files: Democracy is Not Dead; It Just Smells Funny*, 2009, seven-channel video installation, approx. 45 min., color, sound. Installation views at Konsthall C, Stockholm. Courtesy of the artist.

La buena vida/The Good Life (2005-2008) for example, was my first attempt at investigating the citizens' consciousness around issues of democratic representation and how the experience of democracy (or the lack thereof) may affect our lives beyond the mediated public aspect of the 'political'. The work investigates the affective and personal effects of politics: For example, what is the relation between love and politics, fear and politics, or sex and politics? These questions are more subtle approaches to a contested field of personal and public political relations.



Fig.5 *La buena vida/The Good Life* (2005-2008) view of the website, the project consists of more than 400 interviews that are accessible online. These were conducted in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Guatemala, La Paz, Managua, México City, Panamá, Santiago, San Salvador, São Paulo, and Tegucigalpa, [http:// la-buena-vida.info](http://la-buena-vida.info).

While working on *La buena vida/The Good Life* I met so many different kinds of people—from Catholic priests to political refugees to transgender prostitutes—that expressed the ways in which democracy and its implementation affected them. For example, how does a priest who is interested in social justice and community advocacy relate to the concept

of democracy? That conversation led me to look again into the history of Liberation Theology and made evident that one of my subsequent projects should approach this subject. Another conversation with a transgender prostitute led me to understand how the notion of democracy is not transparent when it pertains to gender politics and sex work. Conversations with Latin American political exiles (in Sweden) made me see how democracy may indeed have 'limits' even within established social democracies when race and class challenge the self-image of a given culture and a state. These concerns made me develop the *Democracy Cycle*, a cycle of five projects that approach these social issues.

SK: The re-enactments, or rather the re-readings, of the six speeches in *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice* and the six sermons in *Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament*, conjure the idea of the change in meaning of photographs in Walter Benjamin's sense. He asserts that these are contingent and change meaning over time. In view of your projects, I propose an expanded view of this to include archival documents. So if we consider documents as contingent; my question is: How did the documents you used in *Six Acts* and *Deus Pobre* change and/or acquire new meanings over time?

CM: That question is at the core of my projects. For instance *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice* is based on performative public re-readings of political speeches about the notion of peace that were delivered by liberal, left-wing and communist presidential candidates who were assassinated in Colombia while they were campaigning. My interest in orchestrating these events was very context, site and date specific. In 2010 the conservative eight-year rule of Álvaro Uribe Vélez was ending and the left had an opportunity to re-present itself. At this point, I thought it would be interesting to revisit the way in which the left has been persecuted in Colombia. The speeches, which were originally delivered in the last one hundred years, speak very specifically about the patterns of violence and oppression in Colombian society. The impulse to re-perform them in the wake of the elections was to create a historical connection between the now and the then, very much in a Benjaminian sense, and

have these speeches speak to the cycle of violence that continues to haunt us in the present. It was eerie to see how, for example, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's speech in La Plaza de Bolívar felt so current and urgent... It seemed as if the speech had been written to protest Uribe's mandate.



Fig.6 *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice, Act I*, Rafael Uribe Uribe, performed by Carmiña Martínez.

Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament is slightly different but it is born from a similar impulse: To look at the role of the church today in Latin America, its relationship to social oppression, and to tie it back to the role of the church all the way from the years of the Conquest through to the years of Liberation Theology in the 1960s. Using Liberation Theology as an anchor was fascinating since it is a theological practice and a social movement that sprouted in the 1960s—although it can be argued that it began in the 17th Century with figures like Bartolomé de las Casas, António Vieira and Antonio de Montesinos—priests that confronted the Spanish and Portuguese crowns with the attempt of saving and protecting the lives and culture of the indigenous people of the Americas. This is something that would then be recovered in the 1960s in relationship to

underprivileged communities in Perú with Gustavo Gutiérrez, Brazil with Leonardo Boff, and El Salvador with Óscar Romero, amongst countless others throughout the world. All of these figures opposed the tyrannical power forces of the institution of the church in favour of faith and the word of God as something that needs to be preserved and re-articulated.

The texts I chose to include in *Deus Pobre* precisely speak to power from within churches in Porto, Portugal. It was significant to me to symbolically contain these performances within that same space of religious practice as a form of resistance. Both, in that it acts as an architecture of power in relationship to the institution of the church, but also as a place of individual faith and a relationship with God that is very much a personal one.



Fig.7 *Deus Pobre: Modern Sermons of Communal Lament*, Father José Martins reads Antonio Vieira.

SK: When we spoke before, you said that *La buena vida/The Good Life* was already anachronistic. Considering this and the other projects, how do you think that the three projects will change their meaning over time?

CM: I think this works differently in each work. I think *La buena vida/The Good Life* is now somewhat anachronistic in the sense that it covered a very specific (political) time period from 2005-2008. The specificity in which people responded to the questions is tied to those specific historical things that were happening back then in each of the featured countries. The other projects are different because they are an exercise of generating historical memory from the present. For example *Deus Pobre* is about a historical reflection that is timeless. I can't wait to present this work in the future to see how it will operate. As for *Six Acts*, even though I think it is anchored in 2010, the year of the election, I also think that it has perhaps the capacity to transcend time because it is a performative gesture about collective memory.

SK: I think that this is particularly true of *Six Acts*. The problems and demands that these ex-leaders talked about in their speeches are still current today. For example, you included the Epilogue (Act V, Luis Carlos Galán, Fig. 8). This speech attracted a lot of attention from the people around you and once it finished they approached you and sought help and answers. It is peculiar how the problems, that have already existed so many years ago and are openly addressed in these speeches, still exist in Colombia today.

CM: That moment that you mention made the project successful to me in ways I hadn't anticipated. It exemplifies to me what Jacques Rancière refers to as an aesthetic rupture, the collision of fiction and reality. It was precisely that rupture that made the subsequent interaction with the elderly protesters be a political event in and of itself. The performance stopped being a representation/ reflection about politics, to *be* politics proper. That was really fantastic because it made representation and fiction look each other in the eyes and test each other's limits. For us as performers and makers it was very interesting in the sense that we had to allow this fiction to be broken and engage in very specific current social terms with these people. Atala Bernal, the actress, could not go on pretending that she was Luis Carlos Galán and she couldn't really help in the way they were seeking help.



Fig.8 *Six Acts: An Experiment in Narrative Justice*, Act V, Epilogue, Luis Carlos Galán.

SK: This leads us into your next question. In your interview with Gabriela Rangel you talk about the 'shift of the narrative from documentary to fictional and from referential to symbolic' through the interpretation, rather than the performance, of the speeches by the actors and actresses and the reading of the sermons by the ordained priests.² This alludes to J.L. Austin's idea regarding the use of words and how these acquire different meaning in different contexts. He further says that it depends on how the words are uttered which makes speaking them a performative act (the latter was also asserted by Judith Butler). This is evident when we look at *Six Acts* and *Deus Pobre*. Nevertheless, do you view the re-readings of the speeches and sermons as not performing them?

CM: Both for *Six Acts* and *Deus Pobre* I knew the texts I was interested in working with but once I cast the group, each actor chose the text and character that they felt the most affinity with. It was a process of

²Interview with Gabriela Rangel, website, [accessed 16/10/12]
<http://carlosmotta.com/text/enacting-a-manifesto/>

negotiation with the performers. To me it was important that it was not strictly a 'performative' performance, or in other words, an actor performing the character of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán for example, but rather a performative process of appropriating and owning his expressed ideas, standing behind them and performing them in relationship to the present. So the characters are important but they are not really what the work is about. The work to me is about activating the present meaning of those words as forms of protest to cycles of injustice, which are common to history.

SK: You also talk about the aesthetic experience within your projects, which becomes apparent when we look at the videos because you have planned, shot and edited them. This would constitute another layer of performance rather than just an interpretation of documents.

CM: I use the term 'aesthetic' in the context of these works in an operative way to propose an alternative approach to the idea of seeking justice from the perspective of aesthetics rather than the judicial field. Taking into consideration the fact that we have not been able to find justice through judicial channels; mustn't there be an alternative way to engage in a reparative process? This approach is common to The Theatre of the Oppressed, Third Cinema and other Latin American artistic precedents where aesthetics have been used as a way of seeking reconciliation.

The conceptual framework of *Six Acts* in particular was conceived with the aim of generating public encounters based on aesthetic relations in the manner of the 'rupture' we discussed before. Could that be considered a form of justice? Could we think of an aesthetic experience as filling in for the gaps of the failures of the legislative system?



Fig.9: *We Who Feel Differently*, 2012, five-channel video installation, aprox. 60 min., colour, sound. Installation views at New Museum, New York. Photo by Naho Kubota. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Y Gallery, New York.

SK: Finally, I want to introduce an idea that I thought of as you spoke, and also before when I researched your projects. They seem like living archives in that through re-spoken and re-enacted words etc. you don't just bring these documents to the present, but by performing them, they become said living archive and possibly constitute an archival practice in the interpretation of history. Have you got any thoughts on that?

CM: I like the Benjaminian reference that you established at the beginning of our conversation because of the potential future and use of these works as archives to be dealt with, approached, reconfigured, activated, re-activated historically and so on and so forth. In that sense these projects could be considered as living archives. Especially *La buena vida/The Good Life* and my most recent project *We Who Feel Differently* (2012) (Fig.9), which is also an online data base documentary and a platform to engage in discursive, theoretical, abstract, concrete questions about contemporary sexual and gender politics. As archives these works are also springboards, not only to engage with the materials that are

there, but also actually to use them as a way of discussing those very things they present. Both of these projects can also manifest as physical installations, as (social) sculptures, social spaces to hold public events, etc. I am interested in the idea that artworks aren't solely (an arrangement of) objects that are passively waiting to be discovered but rather situations that need to be activated by an audience—each of whom will have a different experience.

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Carlos Motta is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter narratives that recognize the inclusion of suppressed histories, communities, and identities.

Motta's work has been presented internationally in venues such as Tate Modern, London; The New Museum, The Guggenheim Museum and MoMA/PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá; Serralves Museum, Porto; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson; San Francisco Art Institute and Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin.

Motta is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program. He was named a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow in 2008 and received grants from Art Matters in 2008, NYSCA in 2010 and the Creative Capital Foundation in 2012. He is part of the faculty at Parsons the New School of Design, The School of Visual Arts, Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, the International Center of Photography and The Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Stefanie Kogler is a doctoral student at the University of Essex, UK. Her research focuses on the role of institutional archives and repositories of artists, writers, and curators of art from Latin America, exploring how these archives can affect power relations with the USA. She received her MA in Curating Latin American Art from the University of Essex. This research dealt with the art practices of Carlos Motta and that of Fernando Bryce. She was co-editor of ARARA and co-organised *Art and Maps since 1945*, an annual graduate conference supported by the School of Philosophy and Art History in 2013. She has worked for the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America (ESCALA) and researched the role of censorship in contemporary art from Colombia.