

"What is it to be Colombian?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's an act of faith."

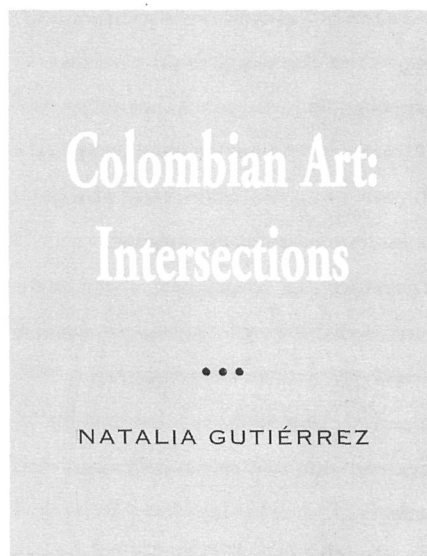
"Like being Norwegian," she agreed.

This is a conversation between a teacher at the University of the Andes in Bogota and a Norwegian woman named Ulrika in the city of York; further details can be found in Jorge Luis Borges'

"Book of Sand". I found it disconcerting because contemporary Colombian art is indeed an act of faith. Although, to lighten such a solemn affirmation, Norwegian art probably is too.

But the point is that in our case, in a country where the collective imagination is violated each evening by the pictures on the television news, José Alejandro Restrepo, Nadim Ospina and Beatriz González have succeeded in bringing a world into our consciousness. They begin, of course, from an exquisite sensibility, which is in turn confronted by a whole series of languages that are superimposed like layers, one over the next, but which are also folded, mixed and expanded.

By this I refer to the visual layers which have accumulated over time and which artists endeavour to investigate and intersect. At the bottom of our visual baggage, for example, are those 19th-century prints which represented us and introduced us to the world in complete arbitrariness, barbarity, romanticism and good will, but also the textures of the electronic image, a horizontal network of dots that is



swept 30 times per second so that each dot lights up after the previous one. For José Alejandro Restrepo (born in Bogotá in 1959), these two lines intersect, and video becomes an electronic print: a mixture which expands our visual world.

In *El paso de Quindío*, a 1991 video-installation, he used Humboldt's diaries to re-explore (like the 19th-century traveller himself) the immense mountains of the Quindío with their misty forests, waxy palm trees and rainstorms. On 11 different sized screens, the humidity and texture of this region (which is the source of our country's water) were turned into black and white flashes and moving images which evolved in their stillness as if they were alive. It is interesting how in *Blue*, the first film in Kieslowski's trilogy, the fuzzy, flickering video screen is a constant element which contrasts with the clarity of the film. These intersections are like traps for the eye, which in turn ends up being invited to continue exploring.

But continuing with our visual baggage, there have also been problems of colour which, to give an arbitrary example, stretch from Vermeer to Matisse and through local colour: i.e. family photograph albums and newspapers, to which Beatriz González (born in Bucaramanga in 1938) has dedicated her investigations. For example, "Los suicidios del Sisga", a series of three paintings made in 1965 at the beginning of her career, are based on the gory details of a newspaper article about the suicide of two lovers who had photographed themselves, arm-in-arm and holding a bunch of flowers, before throwing themselves into the depths of the Sisga. From then on, colour in her work became a popular, enlightening colour, capable of bringing the unexplainable absence of this photograph, as portrayed in the newspaper, back into the living present. She establishes links with recent history, by choosing a close-up photograph of no less than the corpses of drug traffickers spread on the floor. But returning to her knowledge of the classics, to oil painting and drawing, and using her pencil like a scalpel, she gets in close and sews up the seams, the mouths, of these human bundles. Colour then becomes the colour of shadows and also of autopsy. In 1995, with these and other paintings, she held an exhibition called "the colour of death."

Still, in our visual references, we can not exclude Pre-Columbian culture,

Walt Disney, plastic, the Simpson family and even the drawings of our children or of anonymous people with no intention of being artists, and who are probably closer to us than the collections in the Louvre. These people are just waiting for an opportunity, which Nadin Ospina (born in Bogotá in 1960) is keen to give them. Ospina has always referred to different cultural themes with a personalised strategy. At the beginning of his career, surrounded by his own references, he created a world which seemed to have come from plastic toys and chewing gum. From this period the polyester resin “chigueros” are quite unforgettable. These are like ironic totems since, even though they may once have existed in Colombian wildlife, nowadays they are surely in danger of extinction. But he also studied the Tumaco figures carefully and came across that national industry of falsified Pre-Colombian art, and then, in the search for collective signs, he crossed these so-called “false” aesthetics with the indisputable stars of mass media: the adorable Simpson family and the charming Mickey Mouse. This is a rebuke of current Colombian art, so stuck in the parameters of good taste, from a young artist who accepted all codes without question, from television to Piero della Francesca, and began to use them with complete freedom.

At the heart of these three attitudes toward art, there is a fundamental historical consideration. José Alejandro Restrepo said in a recent interview: “Power is obviously exercised

by the strength of political and economic structures, but also through subtleties which we become aware of when we ask ourselves: Who makes history? Who writes it? How is it written? How has it been represented? And, above all, how do you represent it?” For these artists the history of art needs to be taken and traversed by different searches for meaning.

Apart from Fernando Botero, who was the first to converse confidently with the history of art, there is no question that Beatriz González has dedicated herself to the task with great passion. At the start of her career, she began to wonder whether it was really the pictures of Manet or Vermeer which we always saw in reproductions, (mostly faded, black and white, discoloured or over-exposed), that were our true history of art. She thoroughly researched the iconography surrounding Bolívar, elegant and dark-eyed, but “whitened” by 19th century artists to conceal his origin. Nadin Ospina says: “What I admire most in Beatriz González is her capacity to delve into culture, her critical eye, and how she returns her ideas to culture through art in an ironic way. For these reasons she has been very important in my work.” And he also proposes another way of writing history when he decides to change his image from that of the artist as “creator” and owner of a style, to that of the propitiator, commissioning works from the craftsmen of fake Pre-Colombian art because “they pre-Colombianise everything you give them”, thereby rescuing its aesthetics and

exhibiting it in the circuits of so-called “sophisticated art”.

José Alejandro Restrepo has carried the debate about history into the field of anthropology. In fact, his recent installation *Ojo por diente* (1994) is about seeing, about how we have been classified visually, hindering our own identification and that of others. He started with a photograph he found in a schoolbook, the caption of which read: “photo of a cannibal.” And yes, his wide eyes and his big grin – of course! – is still Hollywood-style cannibalism, with its desire to put the white man in the pot. But he found another even more significant photograph while investigating the history of anthropology in Colombia: that of a serious-looking white man, wearing a hat and spectacles, and identified as an anthropologist. How ironic! And so Restrepo resolves to “sacredly” consecrate these two views, in a museum urn, with the cannibal’s teeth and the anthropologist’s glasses classified side-by-side.

This piece is synthetically related to Clifford Geertz’s theory in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, in that it shows us very clearly how we believed the tale about the anthropologist going to an “exotic” place to observe the behaviour of the “others”, and then returning to Paris, London or Chicago to write a famous paper which was supposed to be the transcribed reality of those natives. But Geertz makes us realize that this document is only a story, a version, one way of looking at

things; it is generally just make-believe, but we have learned to consider it as truth. In the same book, he decides on a concept of culture as semiotic concept. He says: "Thinking as Max Weber does that man is an animal all wrapped up in nets of meaning which he himself has woven, I believe that culture is that warped cloth and that any analysis of it must therefore be not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretative science in search of meanings". And later he adds: "Even a burlesque wink is a piece of cultural data that should be interpreted, because the anthropologist should question its ontological condition."

How strange! That burlesque wink is just like the crocodile's wink in Restrepo's video-installation called *El cocodrilo de Humboldt no es el cocodrilo de Hegel* (1994). This piece is also a result of the investigations he has been carrying out for years, attempting to retrieve a country and its interpretations, based primarily on the diaries of Humboldt. As he himself recounts, he came across a 19th-century print of a huge crocodile, standing on two legs like a pre-diluvial monster; he also encountered an apparently insignificant but rather revealing debate between Hegel and Humboldt. In the video-installation we then see two opposing quotes. The first: "America has proved itself to be, and is still, physically and spiritually impotent. Its lions, tigers and crocodiles may well look like their counterparts in the Old World, but they are weaker and less powerful in all

respects" (from Hegel's *Lessons on the History of philosophy*). And the second: "I would voluntarily renounce European beef which Hegel, in his ignorance, considers superior to American beef, and I would like to live close to the delicate, weak crocodiles which are unfortunately 25 feet long" (from Humboldt's *Letters from America*). Faced with this discussion between the Europeans, Restrepo's crocodile slowly gives an enormous wink on the video screen. A wink to be interpreted.

'Investigation' and 'reinterpretation' are two words we should look into further. José Alejandro Restrepo says: "Beatriz González taught me to love the 19th century with her writings but above all with her passion." She rescued the meaning of the word "investigate" which, according to the dictionary, means to attempt to discover something, to research and inquire. Restrepo's latest video-installation, *Musa Paradisiaca* (1996) came out of this inquiry. Its subject is the banana, the Paradisiacal Muse, the fruit of paradise and of abundance, represented in a print for the study of the banana plant and taken from the 19th-century *Voyage a la Nouvelle Grenada* by Charles Saffray. But the Paradisiacal Muse also involves the implicit recognition of Urabá, an area suffering from economic and political violence and horrible massacres, which, hard though it may be to accept it, violate our collective imagination, as we said earlier. The artist began by choosing, cutting and preparing the bananas to hang them

up in a gallery space which smells and breathes, but which then witnesses the withering and death of the plants. From these plants, two screens are hung, reflected in mirrors and playing two video tapes: Adam and Eve are naked, as in the myth of paradise, and the latest edition of television news, thereby confronting the two most chilling contradictions of our society: Myth and reality.

According to Geertz, all data is really an interpretation of interpretations by other people about what they and their fellows think and feel. Therefore a text, a myth and even a wink are not data to observe or believe, but rather they are there to be interpreted and reinterpreted. That is how Restrepo sees myths, how Beatriz González sees history and how Nadin Ospina sees the role of the artist in contemporary society.

Investigation and reinterpretation have been present in the work of Beatriz González right from the beginning. She began with close scrutiny of the newspaper articles on which her work was based. For this reason she does not forget the images from our past or recent history. And so, by free association, in her current paintings it is impossible to overlook the rivers of crosses, scythes and deaths-heads taken from Colombian caricature, or the sleeping and dead bishops painted by Fernando Botero. But also the family photo albums where, as in so many Colombian families, one can find the face of grandfather lying on his deathbed. Since all these stories are recorded in her memory, she is able to

displace them and condense them so that they take place in a single place and time.

“Contraflujo”, a 1994 oil-painting, shows the head of a woman who is apparently dreaming of a dead hare, as if the destiny of every artist were really, as Beuys held, burial in one’s own thoughts. Recognisable and anonymous characters begin to emerge in her paintings, accommodating themselves to the format as if on a river-bed, and sailing all mixed up with their own dreams or with all kinds of events, like parallel stories, in homage to chance as the artistic method to which Beatriz González has yielded completely.

Investigation and displacement are also conceptual operations used by Nadin Ospina. The idea of simulation appeared on the scene in a piece called *in partibus infidelium* (1992), a museum of “unfaithful” or fake Pre-Colombian works, and in *Fausto* (1992), in which he used the painting of a fashionable young Colombian artist, cut up and framed by Ospina and then hung in the gallery, thereby adopting rather ironically the role of collector and curator. His latest project *Estrellas de piedra* began a few years ago when he published advertisements in the press asking people in general, or those who considered themselves unknown artists, to send their work; a talent agency. His perception of everyday things allowed him to better observe the drawings of his 5-year-old daughter Mariana, spontaneous and free from artistic

pretensions. Thus began a labour of cultural recycling which not only collects images but, like a snake which bites its own tail, tries to find systems so as to circulate these images. And how? By sending them to an artist to be painted in oils, to a professional painter, skilled yet not involved in so-called artistic circles. As well as being the materialisation of his references in space, this work also clarifies Ospina’s stance as an archaeologist of languages; the role of the artist might consist of rescuing these languages and circulating them through visible means of communication.

I chose these artists because their attitude allows me a further reflection that I hold to be important: that is, none of them pay tribute to narcissism in art. Narcissism can be a starting point but definitely not a finishing point. If any interested reader has got this far, I would like to propose one last intersection: the reflections of Richard Sennett in his book *El declive del hombre público*. Roughly paraphrased, Sennett states that there is nothing more boring than listening to the retelling of someone else’s dream. If it happens to be told in an expressive way, perhaps even with a little drama, then it holds our attention. But if for some reason the language manages to awaken in the listener images he had forgotten, and suddenly causes him not only to recognise his own history but also to widen his horizons with new possibilities of knowledge, then we would surely be on the path of art.

And it is true that we are accustomed to art becoming the exhibition of my little personal history and of my little feelings, as if self-knowledge were an end in itself rather than a means toward knowledge of the world. According to Sennett, private feeling has become a complete model for reality, and this is why we have fallen into a trap: the trap of using the popular idea of narcissism as love of beauty itself and as the logical origin of a good deal of cultural behaviour, without analysing how narcissism, in the strict sense of the word, is in fact self-observation that obstructs understanding of all that lies outside the self, thereby eliminating the possibility of a meaningful social encounter.

It may be hard to believe, but these three artists manage to externalise their sensitivity and they dedicate their time to observing and investigating collective signs. They are no longer the only protagonists, but rather they are points of intersection – passageways as Restrepo says, cinema producers according to Nadin, or spaces in history and fate like González. They are propitiators who make things happen.

“What is it to be Colombian?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It’s an act of faith.” And yes, Colombian art is definitely an act of faith: faith in humour, in friends, in images, in dreams, in fate, in history, in intersections, in sensitivity and in personal searches for meaning.