

**From 0 to 4,000: a vertical glimpse**

*Marta Lucía Vélez*

The title of this curatorship, which encompasses Cuba and countries of the Andean region (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela), alludes to a journey that was undertaken to search for the artworks and made from a vertical perspective, in other words, one that avoids geopolitical borders. This selection covers different territories and populations, starting from sea level, such as el Malecón de La Habana, in Cuba, and going as high as four thousand meters of altitude, where the Titicaca Lake rests in the Bolivian high plateau. It was not an easy feat. The works we found are really unknown in Latin America and, in some cases, are better appreciated in international circuits. Ultimately, I had a positive impact when I saw over six hundred artworks. In this region, experimental video and film have been considered, in regular exhibitions, something minor, and it is not unusual to find texts, organizations, and even curatorships with pejorative names that immediately depreciate the value of the works: Scum, Powerlessness, Invisible Images, Emerging Art, Invisible Videographies, Displaced – Contemporary Art of Colombia, among many others. Contrary to popular belief, this selection is meant to dissuade the audience from such impression when brought face to face with the works.

Within the Latin American context, video art reached the countries relatively late. The first initiatives of showing works using video technology publicly took place in the late 1970s. It took even longer to reach Cuba, where it was introduced thanks to the interest of European and U.S. cultural centers and embassies. These institutions organized exhibitions with the works of internationally acclaimed artists, showing the local audience the state of art at that time. It was then that a new wave of local artists started to explore new tools when creating art pieces. Nowadays, foreign institutes, with the support of some local art institutes, continue to be mostly responsible for organizing art exhibitions exclusively geared towards electronic art. An important example of such cooperation was the French-Latin American Festival of Video Art, which was organized by the Foreign Affairs Ministry of France. In the 1990s, perhaps this was the only venue available for, on the one hand, a periodic video art exhibition displaying a selection of the most recent productions from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia and, on the other hand, a rich encounter of Latin American audience, artists, and academics as well as French delegates who visited us every year. Paradoxically, the main exhibition venue of the festival, Colombia, would not include works from its neighboring countries for display in the festival, but would include works from countries located far away, instead. There was always hope to host other local exhibitions, but unfortunately the festival ceased to exist. Differently from the Andean countries, the first initiatives in Brazil for organizing public exhibitions started in 1974 thanks to the initiative of Brazilian institutions.

It would not be incorrect to state that experimental art in the countries covered in this study shares a similar evolution. It was only in the late 1980s that a more eloquent and autochthonous art production started to emerge, with nuances and themes typical of the culture and special features of each country. It was also at that time that artists with a more consolidated production began to appear, many of whom are still active to this day. In the case of Cuba, for example, the production difficulties were greater due to economic, political,

and technical constraints; however, talent and filmmaking tradition have made the islanders able to overcome all their difficulties eloquently. Antonio Eligio Tonel<sup>1</sup> expresses his opinion about this as follows:

In the island, videomaking becomes much more noticeable only in the second half of the 1990s during the so-called "special period," a moment dominated by a profound socioeconomic crisis that struck this Caribbean nation after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In the proposals of the artists of this region, eloquence of language predominates over skillful application and use of technology for several reasons. Firstly, due to difficult access to more sophisticated equipment—at least until the late 1990s. Secondly, due to insufficient training on how to use it. Thirdly, because the artists themselves have to produce and finance their works entirely. Regardless of all the difficulties, today this region can count on a group of artists that has enjoyed international recognition in the major art shows and exhibitions around the world and whose works show a unique inventiveness in the narrative, subjects, and esthetics. Somehow, these works drift apart from the stylistic standardization that has flooded the majority of the contemporary art creations, perhaps as a result of local copying or adaptations made of works of the most internationally renowned artists in this field.

With a few exceptions, this selection includes works of well-known artists who have been continuously active and who do not stick to expressive means obtained from videomaking, digital media, and filmmaking for their creative purposes. Those works show a greater interest in approaching aspects inherent to political, historical, and social events, not only of local scope but also extramural, instead of displaying sophisticated technological applications. Artists resort to humor, poetry, parody, metaphor, and direct criticism to achieve their goal. This results in works with peculiar density. Luisa Marisy, from Cuba, creator of the Fast-Forward project, writes about the Cuban production<sup>2</sup>:

We could address some expressive resources and discursive lines adopted in the Cuban proposals. Firstly, an austere use of technology and the flawless execution of the works prioritizing content over the showy technological boast. Others work based on rereading, deconstruction, and updating of Cuban and international film classics, whereas some others faithfully follow their line of research, like "chroniclers of their times," making most of the vernacular, parody, and irony to approach a subject matter relative to the context within which it evolves.

The exhibition contemplates a wide range of subjects, artistic trends, and innovative narrative. This curatorship privileged two combining elements based on a broad and free perspective. On the one hand, in the first section, which I have called *Altered States*, there are recovered works whose value is increased because of the place in which they were conceived, namely, works that successfully contemplate the context where the pronouncement originates from, be it political, social, or historical. This can be seen, for example, in Alexander Apostol's review on the decline of the modernist project in Caracas, driven by the peak of oil production in the 1950s. Another example is the video performance about the life in exile of Felipe Dulzaidés, from Cuba, among others. On the other hand, in *Of Public Domain*, works that unrestrictedly transcend the local discourse have been

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TONEL, Antonio Eligio. Una lucidez desagradable: Juan Carlos Alom, Manuel Piña, Felipe Dulzaidés y la imagen que se mueve en Cuba. *Parachute*, 125, January 2007.

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Fast-Forward Exhibition of Cuban Video Art Project, curator Luisa Marisy, 29 Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, Havana, December 2007.

included: they are based on profound dissertations, such as Jose Alejandro Restrepo's, from Colombia, or the symphony of images and sounds by Juan Carlos Alom, from Cuba, going all the way to the funny, daring, and radical comedy of Carlos Eduardo Monroy, also from Colombia.

### **Altered States**

Altered states refer to pronouncements originating from different regions and cultures, ranging from the warm Caribbean countries to the bright native lands of the Andean high plateau. Here, artists resort to the multiple choices given by videomaking or filmmaking to face and address local realities about the origin, memory, ostracism, censorship, city, sociocultural contamination, and the influences left behind by a common settler.

In the 1950s, both Caracas and Bogota agreed with the idea of introducing a modern architecture. In Bogota, Le Corbusier designed the Centro Nariño, a cluster of buildings used to accommodate students who moved from the provinces to the city. Additionally, he designed a pilot project (never executed) of the city. In Caracas, this initiative was undertaken with great enthusiasm. Monumental works were built, such as the Helicoide and the Torres del Silencio, some of which would become useless over time. This modernity dream and its clear contradiction to its functionality inspired the Venezuelan artist Alexander Apostol to build his message. Through his lens, Apostol harshly criticizes such cluster of outdated and contradictory structures. The *TV Documental* video was selected and it portrays a family that lives in a humble house in the outskirts of Caracas and is watching a television show made in the 1950s and it describes the birth of a new country and a new society in Venezuela. Apostol's work stresses the failure of the project, represented by great architectural icons that symbolize progress and grandeur within a decline and dismantling context.

The increased purchasing power brought about by the petrodollars allowed Venezuelans to have access to the U.S. culture, which influenced the country to a large extent. Consumption, fashion, and foreign images intermix with everyday events and produce curious contrasts. In her video performance *Porca Miseria*, María Cristina Carbonell, from Venezuela, plays, dressed like a transvestite wearing shocking and colorful clothes she bought in Miami's marketplaces, three female characters thoroughly stereotyped and feeling out of place: a geisha in a tropical country, a mermaid who works as a waitress in a bar, and a beheaded woman who is an object of desire. It is a giddy mix of imitations of fantastic characters and superheroes placed in new contexts. Using a kitsch language, Carbonell reinterprets and parodies, adopting a popular local style, a crazy mix of cinema references revived by archetypes of fantastic characters from American movies that left traces in the Venezuelan collective imagery.

Colombia is a country that has been struggling against domestic issues for over fifty years. Some of the government's initiatives included thwarting media visibility to the armed groups. *Los Rebeldes del Sur*, name of the FARC musical group, is an apparently simple video work in which Colombian Wilson Diaz recorded a live concert during a military evacuation from a forty-thousand-hectare territory, which was set for the peace negotiations during the government of President Andrés Pastrana. This video provoked heated discussions after it was removed by the Colombian ambassador in England from a curatorship of the contemporary

Colombian art,<sup>3</sup> for the ambassador had interpreted it as an apology for guerrilla activities. A quote from a newspaper article about this controversy follows below.<sup>4</sup>

The set of videos that artist Wilson Diaz shot in San Vicente del Caguán during the 2000 peace talks was “removed” by the ambassador Carlos Medellín, just like someone who mutilates a book or eliminates one movement from a symphony; and with this arbitrary gesture, the exhibition was left incomplete. When he argued that ‘we, civil servants, cannot show nor promote illegitimate organizations,’ Medellín confused the fine line between ‘show’ and ‘represent,’ and that is precisely the nuance of art.

Cuba is a country that seemed lost in ostracism, acts of silencing, and censorship. Now, however, a new wave of artists that live and work in the island offer a repertoire of film and video productions that amazes because of its daring discourse and because they avoid any stereotypes. *El Síndrome de la Sospecha*, by Lázaro Saavedra, is a satire leading to a deep and relentless reflection on collective surveillance, a common practice in the Cuban society. In this short-length piece, incisive humor softens the critique of discourse.

Felipe Dulzaides is a Cuban artist who took the risk and crossed the sea to reach the United States. He spent eight years without going back to his homeland and because of that many of his works focus on absence, separation, and exile. *Arriba de la Bola* is a very popular song from the 1990s by Cuban singer Manuel González Hernández, better known as “El Médico de la Salsa” [The Salsa Doctor]. In this video performance, Felipe Dulzaides keeps whispering the chorus over and over again to the camera: “Porque hay que estar arriba de la bola, arriba de la bola, arriba de la bola” [because we have to stay on top of the ball, on top of the ball, on top of the ball]. This expression means that, if we are to survive, we need to have a pragmatic attitude towards life, be part of the game so as not to lose out on any benefit. With full breath, as he fades out in front of the camera lens, Dulzaides lets out a solitary and visceral lament about living in exile. However, what would usually be a contagious chorus of a happy song with tropical rhythms then turns into a disturbing whisper of emptiness and discouragement.

It is not rare to come across videos showing heads of state referring to their achievements in numbers, but these are usually accompanied by a visual reference of the character in question. In the case of *Opus*, by José Angel Toirac, from Cuba, the viewer can only hear the voice of the dignitary instead, while the sound track dictates a series of numbers that are projected onto the screen. What is interesting here is that there is no need to show the image as the viewer immediately knows that that is Fidel Castro speaking with his unmistakable popular media voice that is already part of the collective memory of Cubans. The sound track

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Displaced – Contemporary Colombian Art, organized by María Clara Bernal and Karen McKinnon and funded by the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be exhibited at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, England.

4 REYES, Yolanda. Bodegones y violencia. [http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/volandareves/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA\\_INTERIOR-3830673.html](http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/volandareves/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR-3830673.html)

was composed with all the statistic numbers quoted by Fidel Castro in only one speech: the one delivered to open the 2003-2004 school year at the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Cuba.

*Camal*, by Miguel Alvear, from Ecuador, is a 16-millimeter, black-&-white-and-color documentary shot in the market plaza Empresa Municipal de Rastro, also known as Camal, in Quito. This documentary scans the corners of this square, emphasizing in minute detail the sordid scenes of a live animal being slaughtered for human consumption. This film with expressionist characteristics reveals the emotions and nature of both the sacrificed animals and those who slaughter hundreds of cows, pigs, sheep, and other animals eaten by a vast majority of the population in Quito. In the midst of these scenes, the viewer watches the bestialization of the beings depicted. It is surprising to find today filmmaking media being used to make experimental works and, above all, artists like Alvear that are interested in using the celluloid texture to emphasize written parts.

Alfredo Román Bulacio, from Bolivia, shows a subjective view of extreme situations that can be experienced in public places around Bolivia and the inertia of the people involved. In the video *Chopin*, Chopin's music is played in the background of a performance. It is a young naked Bolivian man, wearing a gas mask worn in World War II, walking through the flooded corridor of a marketplace in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, where American second-hand clothes are sold. After buying piece by piece, the man eventually leaves the flooded corridor dressed up. Starting from a flood that seems to bother no one, Román reflects on repression, sociocultural pollution, and the extreme conditions that can be witnessed in the Bolivian setting.

Bolivians yearn for a chance to sail away at sea. *horizonte sin horizonte*, by Sandra De Berduccy, is a work of particular density where she weaves a metaphor between cargo boats that sail across vertical horizons that are transformed into threads of a Bolivian fabric, of the Macha culture, which is also used to carry goods. De Berduccy uses the video as a medium through which a Bolivian symbolic element can meet the sea. Different horizons represent different journeys. This video incites to evoke memories and beckons the viewer to reflect on loss, migration, and looting to the beat of the Sipe-Sipe earthquake music, the cavalry bolero played to the Bolivian fighters during the Chaco war.

The irruption of Europe into Latin America destroyed traditions, beliefs, icons, charms, and idols and imposed its culture onto cultures that were not fully developed yet, thus annihilating other possible ways of thinking, of sharing knowledge, of behaving, even of expressing mannerisms. The video *Tuyo Es el Reino*, by Patricia Bueno, from Peru, starts on March 31, 1950 with the president of Peru Manuel Odría's speech. His address was to inform about the enactment of a new rule establishing uniformity of the nation's symbols. Three women from the 1950s, hidden behind delicate china mannequins and wearing shabby fur coats, get together after going through a painful experience. They engage in an unconnected talk that does not convey anything at all. The video discourse only becomes coherent through the refined gestures, sophisticated objects, and the stiffness of the masks that hide an oligarchy reluctant to stand firm on its principles within a Creole culture and to accept to be represented by the *vicuña* or the *quinoa*. This video is a cynical allegory of the origin of the Peruvian society and the continuance of deep-rooted traditions, which could be not only Peruvian, but also

Colombian and Ecuadorian. Likewise, this is a dissection of anachronistic societies that hide themselves but continue existing.

### **Of Public Domain**

In this second selection, on the one hand, there are works that transcend local discourse, and artists that develop uneasy and interpretative forms of writing on dense subjects that play a transcendent role in the current society, such as the works by François Bucher and Jose Alejandro Restrepo, both Colombians. On the other hand, there are more sociological-gearred works, like Cuban Juan Carlos Alom's film, or the hilarious comedy by Carlos Eduardo Monroy, from Colombia.

Based on a metaphor on a balanced presence of white in front of a video camera to adjust color, through sophisticated image editing and texts from different types of communication media, François Bucher delivers in *White Balance (to think is to forget differences)* a political and critical discourse on how daily images and messages produced by the mass media shape the collective imagery and consolidate the xenophobia that prevails today, particularly after the attacks of September 11 in the United States. In this work, Bucher incorporates Latin America into a global issue, leaving aside the approaches focused on local issues, that were frequently put from a colloquial identity perspective.

The work by Jose Alejandro Restrepo transcends the specific fact of an anecdote to reach a philosophical reflection on image. By starting from the question: "How can we understand violence?" Restrepo goes deep into its atrocious manifestations by making analogies with Christian religion iconography that has survived in the collective imagery of current societies. *Nuevas Consideraciones sobre la Imagen* is a video whose starting point was a news story broadcast on several television channels in Colombia. They showed the images captured by two Colombian policemen of a man harassing two girls. The artist then manipulated those images, shifting the focus from a news event to a debate and reflection on the relevance of those images. The postulates of Álvaro Uribe, president of Colombia, and criteria of TV news programs are superimposed onto passages of wise men and saints about old considerations on images. In the words of the artist himself:

"Nuevas consideraciones sobre la imagen", in fact, very old, dating back at least from the 8th century. The fight for images is an essential part of the loot of theological-political spheres. The technology of images has become sophisticated, but the rhetoric remains the same as that of Byzantine debates. Here is a recent example that updates the debate.

Another astonishing work from the Cuban repertoire is the film *Habana Solo*, by Juan Carlos Alom, filmed in 16 millimeters, black and white, and *developed manually* by the videomaker, which gives the film the texture of decay over time. This work shows a symphony of images and sounds of the streets of Havana. The free camera lens of Alom wonders through the streets of the city revealing the soul of its inhabitants and the pace of life in the place to the sound of instrument solos in the background played by some renowned Cuban musicians (Frank Emilio, Tata Güines, Enrique Lázaga, and José Luis Cortés). From an anthropological perspective, this video captures moments of the city and takes spontaneous snapshots of its inhabitants. The sound of each instrument solo performance lends meaning to the images and adds rhythm to the film editing.

*Retratos Familiares*, by Carlos Eduardo Monroy, is a funny, daring, and radical comedy. It took eleven minutes to take a *perfect picture* of a traditional Colombian family. Six people sitting on a sofa get ready to take a family photo: Monroy, his parents, his aunt with her husband, and their child. All the attention is concentrated on the camera, which is always off screen and is set in front of the sofa. On one side, a video camera, which nobody looks at, records the scene as a curious bystander lurking in, witnessing all the difficulties the family faces to find the right pose. The cameras never appear on the screen. One item of clothing, a photo, another item, another photo, the characters look frightened, inhibited by shame, the couples encourage one another. Monroy tries to get them to relax, but he would need to be more intrepid. Chastity blocks their way. The picture fades into the background. What matters now is to free oneself from hang-ups and shame of the nude, because nudity is only allowed in private. Taking family portraits is a common practice in Latin America, but the portrait Monroy proposes, which requires each family member to be audacious, may lead everyone to a sociological reflection.

It was a very rich experience for me to conduct a research in countries that failed to have a good mapping of their experimental video and film productions, as opposed to the production of other countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, or countries from other continents, whose works are exhibited in Latin American festivals. It is disturbing to see the lack of room to disseminate this type of work in one's own region. It is hard to understand why it is so difficult to manage to have an overview of the productions from our neighboring countries with all the current technological resources available today. The simplest example of this type of regional disconnection can be seen in the news that reaches Latin America thanks to channels such as the American CNN. In a boomerang effect, the news leaves Latin America, travels to the United States, and then bounces back after being processed by American news. Finally, it is amazing to find so many artists and works whose quality and goals outdo expectations by far. It is worthwhile noting that this curatorship is only one out of other possible ways of gazing at experimental productions in this Neotropical strip, which goes from 0 to 4,000 meters above sea level.

### **Marta Lucía Vélez**

Director of *la.diferencia.co*, *Panorama de la Videosfera Internacional*, an organization that fosters dissemination of and reflection on themes related to the creation of electronic supports. Curator of the *Colombia de Docfera*, an Internet platform to preserve and disseminate Latin American documentaries. She also worked in the planning committee of the French-Latin American Festival of Video Art between 1992 and 1996. She was also producer and curator of the *Experimenta Colombia*, Latin American Festival of Electronic Arts, in 2005. She makes documentaries and her latest work, made in 2007, *Vacaciones sin Regreso*, is a project that was given an award by the Fondo para el Desarrollo Cinematográfico in Colombia. She has made a dozen documentaries in Latin America with journalist Patrick Charles Messance upon commission from different French television channels. She works as a journalist in Colombia for the France 2 news program, from France, and other French television media.