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Slow-mo: The Violent Art of Oscar Murillo

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Abstract:

This essay explores Afro-Colombian artist Oscar Murillo's characterisation of the current situation as a case of violent amnesia. Specifically, what this characterisation might entail for an understanding and illumination of artistic and political practice nowadays. Animated by an ongoing exchange between the artist and the author on the subject of art & human rights, in the concrete context of protests in the Americas and elsewhere as well as the 2021 demonstrations in Colombia, the piece aims to situate emerging notions of aesthetic justice in the intersection between artistic practices and ethical-political acts and discourses, asking if and how can art engage with questions of race and class in the 21st century. To do so, it proposes an encounter between Murillo's artwork and Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial institutions.

Keywords:

Violent amnesia, aesthetic justice, institutional analysis, percept-imagination sociology, sense-as-orientation, possibility, late colonial settler condition, double awareness, catalyst images.

1. Accelerate! Reflections on Practice, Process & Critique in the Work of Óscar Murillo.

Back in 2017 I filmed the Turner Award winning, London-based, Colombia-born, Afro-Latin American artist Óscar Murillo during a performance and conversation titled 'Acc€lerate!'. The event was part of a collection of artworks and reflections that Antonia

Carver and I had co-curated for the eleventh edition of the Global Art Forum (GAF), running parallel to the yearly Dubai Art Fair, under the gathering theme of 'Trading Places.'

Our brief was to explore the relationship between the economy of goods and ideas that under the current dispensation constantly shapes who and where we are. But we also wanted to investigate how this constant reshaping of society and nature today could resonate, as in a counterpoint, with older dreams of order through calculation and the newer forms of governance by numbers. Our understanding was that today, as yesterday, mathematical ordering within a frame of reference and the aesthetic imagination have been combined in the search for a key to the intelligibility and dominion of spacetime and the cosmos.¹

Indeed, since ancient times the search for ultimate grounds and something to hold onto has appealed to laws and numbers. Through geometry and mathematics in the case of the natural order. Through law and economics, but also geo-politics and metaphysical psycho-geographies, in the case of the social order. However, it's only in more recent times that the content of laws seems to have been subordinated to a calculus of utility. And, as such, put into the service of the 'economic harmonies' that would supposedly guarantee the functioning of a global society without conflict.

¹ See on this, Alain Supiot, 'La gobernanza de los números. El sueño de la armonía mediante el cálculo, in *Le Monde Diplomatique (en Español)* (February 2015) 3 and *Governance by Numbers. The Making of a Legal Model of Allegiance* (London: Hart Publ. & Bloomsbury, 2017). Also, Roberto Mangabeira Ungar and Lee Smolin, *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Drucilla Cornell, 'Derrida's Negotiations as Techniques of Liberation' in *Discourse. A Journal for Theoretical Studies and Media Culture*, vol. 39, issue 2 ed. by O. Guardiola-Rivera (Wayne State University

Critics of this process have responded to it by pointing out that it threatens to flatten realities both natural and institutional, and that behind the anxiety to take hold of an ultimate frame of reference in which everything would have its place lies nothing more than aggression, the persistence of a colonial violence that does not dare speak its name, a geopolitics of progress-as-fact, or a system in which the arbitrary and the axiomatic go hand in hand, and ultimately nihilism.²

But if so, does that mean we should give up on the possibilities of mathematics for the critical imagination, its metaphors and positionality in action, precisely at a time when algorithms read novels, digital maps plot the geographies of art and reason, and NFTs blur the boundaries between art and global trade even further? Murillo's practice and process seemed apposite to these aims and explorations precisely because it constantly refers to the elements of geometric projection that constitute the basis of drawing as a 'compass' or a vector of direction and orientation, but also relates to cartography and frameworks, to the limits, judgments, or boundaries that cut landscapes and separate life as well as peoples, often literally, from the critical perspective of a social investigator.

² See, for example, Enrique Dussel, *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (Mexico: Siglo XXI editors, 2017) 8 and 268n22. Also, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, 'On the Apophatic Urgency of Now: A Future for the Philosophy of Liberation,' and Amy Allen, 'The Ethics and Politics of Progress: Dussel and the Frankfurt School', both in Amy Allen & Eduardo Mendieta (eds.) *Decolonizing Ethics. The Critical Theory of Enrique Dussel* (University Park: The State University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021) 127-146 for the aesthetic turn in Dussel's and decolonial critical theory and 167-181 for the connection with the earlier tradition of Benjamin and Adorno. See also, T. W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (London: Polity, 2008) 144-147 and more recently Alexander Kluge, *Difference and Orientation*, ed. by R. Langston (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019 434-449). For the intersection between art practices, sensing and sense-making as well as justice, Pascal Gielen (ed.), *Aesthetic Justice* (with N. Van Tomme) (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015) and 'When Flatness Rules' in *Institutional Attitudes* (Amsterdam : Valiz, 2013) 1-10 as well as Matthew Fuller & Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics* (London: Verso, 2021).

‘The content of my work is social investigation ... It has been embedded in social discourse for as long as I can remember,’ he has observed. The idea of artistic practice as investigation interested us. One that asks what objects could be produced through this capacity for differentiation that would be neither condemnation nor discrimination, but orientation. An investigation concerning the objects and ideas (aesthetic, political economic, discursive and sense-making) that could be used to demonstrate (in the visual and projective sense of the term) the capacity to differentiate between the old falsehoods and something that can be brought into being. Something new and different. That could help us navigate the choppy waters of our times, when the compasses of old no longer work and the light of lighthouses seems to wane under the shine of the lanterns of wreckers bent on running our boats and trajectories aground to loot them.³

This is what drove me towards Murillo’s practice back then, when I filmed him during the ‘Accelerate!’ performance in the 2017 GAF, and now, in the context of this piece. Both as a practice that emphasises materials and objects and as an emphatic sense of critique. The sense in which Murillo’s investigative practice is aimed against discriminatory separation, but also against any easy reconciliation. ‘Art and life -there is no separation between the two,’ he says in this respect. The same respect in which his producing practice, voice, and persona have been described as a lamentation or denunciation that is ‘always on the edge of revolt.’ Perhaps even a violent art.⁴

³ Óscar Murillo interviewed by Kate Kellaway, ‘I want to hold up a mirror to this country’ in *The Guardian*, posted 16 June 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/16/oscar-murillo-interview-turner-prize-hold-a-mirror-to-this-country>, for quotes. I am also using my notes from conversations with him in the context of my postgraduate seminar on ‘Negotiations and Explorations in Art & Human Rights’ at Birkbeck College, University of London, and in other contexts, for which I am grateful to the artist.

⁴ Ibid.

2. Pause! Reflections on Practice, Process & 'Fantastic' Critique in the Work of Óscar Murillo.

The resulting short-film was titled 'slow-mo'. During the 2017 GAF performance conversation, I filmed Óscar's practice in slow-motion. The aim was to highlight the tension between the acceleration of the process of reification and rule-by-numbers governing the trade, technical, and knowledge systems of late capitalism, on the one hand. And on the other, Óscar's practice as developing what I would like to call a metaphysics of space, reverse projection, and position.

In the film, Murillo can be seen drawing circles and semi-circles, median points, straight and meridian lines, line segments, arrows, winged rectangles, waves, expressive vortices and spirals with coloured stick oils, carbon, and glue on the pages of a sketchbook. At first, they look simple, discrete and diatonic. For instance, he would draw a single line segment and a point outside it which is in fact the projection of a centre, thereby forming an arrow. Several joined semi-circles would be drawn atop the arrows. And the arrows would take a rectangle-like shape traversed in the middle by straight lines and finished with a pointy end. Words or letters added to the scene bring about the sense of being before a montage-like object.

One notices that these figures graphically associate a circle and a triangle, or a rectangle lying on its larger side and a triangular projection. On closer inspection, the semi-circles begin to form clouds moving in the direction signalled by the arrows. What appeared at first simple and diatonic is now dynamic, chromatic, and continuous. Or in motion. Ditto, in the hands of this draughtsman the coloured arrows soon transform into a rectangular figure lying on its longer side, the other end of which, one of the shorter sides, becomes a

triangle inside a semi-circular shape. The transversal lines become wing-like. Both bird-like and machine-like. Murillo is using carbon paper as he draws forcefully, energetically, to allow the sketched fragments of previous pages to be reproduced, anticipate, and become the building blocks of the drawings and collages in the next pages. They seem to vanish, but nothing really disappears here.

The emphasis is on earthly materiality (carbons, carbon paper, oil, stains, dirt, debris, a disposed piece of newspaper) as a key-feature of their storytelling corroboration of endurance and transposition. Like a thread that runs through the notebook, which is being followed and projected into space and time, anticipatory, encyclopaedically magic, fantastic. The amalgamation of geometric segments, writing, found images and discarded objects tell us this isn't merely a sketchbook but a genuine collection - more like 'a diary of objects' or even a fieldwork notebook.⁵

The artists practice moves from commentary to material internalisation. And shifts, process-like, forcefully, even violently, from decisive expression to detective-like activity. Watching Murillo in action, I am reminded of the fact that a true detective isn't the one who catches the criminal but the one who crosses the threshold even at the risk of becoming one. For he knows the criminal is someone who differentiates himself through his actions, rather than allowing himself to be marked by the coordinates that a given framework deems unchanging. In this sense, the detective-criminal, or the artist in this case, is a critical object. Someone who not only provokes a critical capacity with his energetic efforts, but

⁵ See Cecilia Vicuña, *QUIPoem/The precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997) q.34 for 'a diary of objects.' Also, Michael Taussig, *Fieldwork Notebooks* (Kassel and Ostfeldern: dOCUMENTA & Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012) 5 for the characterisation of a 'genuine' collection as a magic encyclopaedia and anticipation in both the work of Walter Benjamin and ethnographic fieldwork in Colombia.

also transforms in the most emphatic sense of the word: that of something brought into being. What would that be? What object could be demonstrative of this capacity for differentiation that produces something rather than condemning something into nothingness? A demonstrative art that moves between the formal and the practical productively, in the sense of *inventio*, rather than assuming certain premises as both unchanging and indubitably applicable in the defence and justification of separating walls and other demarcations (as in *disputatio*).⁶

Watch Murillo as he draws. He's executing, through his practice, a move between what can be called decisive, discriminatory judgment or 'forensic', court-like critique, and what I would like to call, detective-like, anticipatory, productive and transformative or 'fantastic' critique. What seem like arrows becoming a bird becoming an airplane are also suggestive of the direction vectors and hourglass configurations that anthropologists were told about between the 1960s and 1990s during their interlocutions with indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples dwelling in the same landscapes where Murillo and his family come from, which he frequently refers to in interviews and conversation. At around the same time, a generation of Latin American artists focused on materiality and sense of enduring pre-Columbian geometric projections, both as corroborations of resistance in the face of colonial violence and as positional statements. A tectonic or subterranean topology that is geometric and poetic but also happens to be ethically principled. Chief among them

⁶ There's a reference here to certain debates in the Americas between defensive mentalities that hijack the means of demonstration (disputation) and the artistry of demonstrative differentiation and producing orientation (invention), which can be traced back to the event of the colonial encounter. See on this trajectory of Latin American humanism, artistic and discursive, which also happens to be ethical and legal-political, Ambrosio Velasco Gómez et al. *Humanismo Republicano Iberoamericano. Un debate* (Mexico & Barcelona: Biblioteca Nueva, Minerva, Complutense & UNAM, 2019) 79-104.

Cecilia Vicuña and Joaquín Torres-García, the latter cited as part of the trajectory that Murillo succeeds. Here, arrows, lines and signifiers aren't constrained by the colonial capitalist system they contingently encounter, invert, and often subsume in dialogue with the cosmo-plasticity of the visual-spatial reasoning of Afro-Amerindian peoples.⁷

In *Slow-mo*, we first see Murillo composing a landscape divided diatonically, into two spheres, above and below, air and water, out of seemingly simple geometrical shapes and static segments (circles or semi-circles, bisector diametric lines, rectangles and triangles). Next, they begin to transform into clouds, arrows, a bird becoming an airplane up above. A pool or an ocean down below, and at the threshold, swimming/flying fish. The figures display, as if to evidence their inter-transformability and perpetual disequilibrium, a scene that can be seen only superficially as a simple or even childish drawn diatonic landscape. But also, or rather, these images resonate very strongly with certain geometric and architectural representations of the cosmos's moving structure which can be found in the Pacific south-western coast of Colombia, in Amazonia, the Andes and elsewhere.

If the latter reading appears to be submerged, under the surface of the mainstream or 'subterranean', let's propose there are at least two reasons for it.

First, the fact that the study and exploration of art, spatial geometry, literature and legal-political institutional reasoning in the West largely stands on the premise that

⁷ Joaquín Torres-García, *La Ciudad Sin Nombre* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo & Mincultura [1941] 1974) and *Overalls Poem* (1921), *Indoamérica* (ca. 1937) and *América Invertida* (1943). Also, Luis Pérez-Oramas (ed.), *The Arcadian Modern: Joaquín Torres-García* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015) 11, 28 and 36 for the latter's coinage of the neologism 'cosmoplasticity' (*cosmoplastia*), material transitivity and native space-projection in reverse. See Inger Pedrañez, 'Óscar Murillo: Manifiesto Contemporáneo', posted August 2019 in *Revista Estilo* and available at <https://revistaestilo.org/oscar-murillo-manifiesto-contemporaneo/> for Torres-García's significance in Murillo's work.

reasoning and projective institutions, law and economics, for instance, like literature, begin with letters conceived of as a system uncoupled from their medium, or products abstracted from the processes of their production.

Second, such a premise belongs to the set of arbitrary axioms that make up the framework in which judgments are made about the ongoing poetics of signs, texts of image, object, or sound, and weaving stories such as those found throughout Afro and indigeneous communities in the Americas, which denigrate and relegate them as relics of a preliterate and pre-civic past. Not only they tend to be set in a preservational past tense, submerged and protected from the risks of the present as well as prevented from disclosing futures, beyond the given horizon, by a cultural logic of the museum and the archive as a resting place. Also, it is the case that this cultural logic of the archive and the museum as a spatial frame in which everything has its place, abstractly demarcated and quantifiable, which allows a central viewpoint to survey, classify, and (under)value the traditions of other great cultures, constitutes the practice by means of which Europe has been able to manage and protect its centrality (defensively, as if it were a fortress dividing inside/outside, north/south) newly found since at least since the fifteenth century and now global.

The aesthetic practice that we see Murillo executing during *Slow-mo* makes visible the signs and visual-spatial reasoning obscured by the cultural logic of the museum, the archive, and the market. But in this artistic practice the focus is less on some opening to the outside (arguably contained in potential in every dualist scheme, the asymmetry often found in simple diatonic structures) and more on its opening to the inside. Thus, for instance, it's possible to discern motion, positionality, and transposition in the way that Murillo's drawing practice emphasises triadic structures such as vortices, limits and boundaries, connectivity, and lack of relations.

Slow-mo zooms into what happened some eighteen minutes into the ‘Acc€lerate!’ performance at the 2017 GAF. And pauses to think. During the performance, while the New York-based, Iran-born curator Mohammed Salemy can be seen speaking at length to the contemporary situation of so-called ‘Easyjet-setters’ and other precarious workers traversing the borders of today’s artworld, a situation brought about by the longer history of the encounter between modern art and expository value (previously examined during the event by the Hong Kong-based editor of *Ocula Magazine*, Stephanie Bailey), Murillo can be seen creating a collage-like montage in his fieldwork notebook. On one page, the reddish carbon-copied spectre of the landscape drawn before serves as background to a set of joined circles drawn by Murillo. But this time, the once discrete circles (as in diatonic dualism) take the appearance of hollow circular vortices in conjoined motion, like the petals of a flower or the cogs of a machine in an assembly line.

The figure is also evocative of the cosmographic model of the upper and lower worlds among the Kogi and other peoples in Colombia, viewed from above, often associated with whirlpools shooting from the depths of the earth, with birth and rebirth. Our world is a tertiary structure in such projections, represented by the narrower part. On the other page of his notebook, Murillo has glued a found image, a discarded newspaper page printed at the top with the masthead of the main Latina *periódico* in Britain (a newspaper, *diario* or ‘diary’ in Spanish).

3. The World. But Not as You Found It.

The *periódico*, named *Mundo Latino*, is printed in Spanish, and circulates mainly in English-speaking London. In the masthead, the two words in Spanish are separated by the British crown coat of arms. Murillo uses carbons to draw over the word ‘Latino’ and scribbles beneath it the words ‘Racist’, ‘English’ and ‘White people’.

Here, the tertiary structure is neither the Spanish 'Latino' nor the 'English'. But our world, the narrow world in which we experience racism and the voyeuristic, policing gaze of white people daily. The world we live in. The significance of this projected third reality is made clearer, as we can see in *Slow-mo*, when the *Mundo Latino* newspaper masthead, intervened by force drawing so that the word 'Latino' can no longer be seen, is set vertically on the following page of Murillo's notebook, frame-like, beside a 1980-90s photograph of a group of black and brown kids posing alongside what looks like a white police van in the streets of London.

The picture is reminiscent of the photos collected in the contemporary filmography of Jon Akomfrah and Steve McQueen, or in the archives of Stuart Hall's Institute of International Visual Arts. Such films and pictures often refer to acts of racist violence erased from the record or swept under the carpet, as in McQueen's *Lovers Rock* and the New South Cross fire.⁸

As such, they reveal both the long history of colonial violence abroad and its internal impact. On the one hand, the 'coming back home to roost' of colonial violence and its contemporary persistence despite or precisely because of the erasure of entire colonial and imperial histories, external and internal. And, on the other hand, the fact that the concrete result of the two-way impact of colonial violence is a third reality, a 'third world' which is neither here nor there, neither inside nor outside of citizenship-subjectivity and the law, never at home here or there but, to use the German term, *unheimlich*: 'being almost a

⁸ See on this Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, 'Kingdom Risen, Kingdom Fallen: England's Football and Stocking Culture Wars', posted October 2021 in *Writers Mosaic* and available at <https://writersmosaic.org.uk/people/oscar-guardiola-rivera/>

border, and “about to happen”,’ as Cecilia Vicuña observed. Non-being. Not yet. Homeless. Uncanny and terrifying.⁹

‘It’s a terrible country’, Murillo said to art journalist Kate Kellaway during an interview back in 2019 apropos of his *Violent Amnesia* exhibition at Kettle’s Yard, in Cambridge. He was referring to racism, and the hypocrisy of countries that negate their own histories of violence and racism. Like Colombia and the UK. That is, what can be called the mastery and management of knowing what not to know. Which is as perfect a definition of law and order as I’ve ever heard. Colombia prides itself as ‘the country of laws’, one of the oldest ‘uninterrupted’ democracies in the Americas and a stalwart ally of the U.S. in the affirmation of law and democracy in the region against all manner of branded ‘outlaws’, ‘bandits’, and ‘evil’ ideologies as well as substances. Hence the seemingly unending wars ravaging the country’s otherwise ‘beautiful landscape’, as Murillo put it to Kellaway.¹⁰

What Murillo calls ‘hypocrisy’ refers to the kind of violent mastery at stake in the division of the terrain and its population into compartments, or in Manichean terms, ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Being elevated to the metaphysical status of a ruling principle or an unchanging frame of reference -the law- its application and projection upon the terrain and the people slices and dices bodies and the landscape. Literally. This is mastery, which Murillo deems ‘terrible’: the hyperbolic pretence of ‘the country of laws’ which is not an attempt to establish a better society, but ‘an attempt to sustain the reign of terror by

⁹ Cecilia Vicuña, *Seehearing the Enlightened Failure* (Rotterdam and Mexico: Witte de With Publ. 2019) 15.

¹⁰ Óscar Murillo interviewed by Kate Kellaway, ‘I want to hold up a mirror to this country’ in *The Guardian*, posted 16 June 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/16/oscar-murillo-interview-turner-prize-hold-a-mirror-to-this-country>

recreating the system of the unipolar group', to make Fanon's point on the matter of violence ours.¹¹

Put otherwise, the elevation of law from mere appearance into an unchanging framework of judgment, on full display (for show, or expository value) as something to anxiously hold on to and affixed to an absolute subject (diametrically opposed to the subjectivities it condemns as 'evil') in fact covers over the truer reality. The nonsense and absurdity of a world cut in two can only be made sense of if we stitch together two elements or two words which are no longer familiar when put side by side that. That is the tertiary structure that Murillo names 'terrible.' Also, the mimetic practice and process at play in the very enunciation 'Violent Amnesia.'¹²

Aggression. Instability. Anxiety. A world cut in two. The equivalence of guilt, pain, and penance that has been displaced to the sequence of thoughts and assimilated, as the mind of a civilised individual or the spirit of laws and the nation, to the ruling principle. Order. That is, the true reign of terror over existence. 'People have this existence of -you name it- corruption, racism, oppression. I am not going to romanticise it at all. It is a terrible country', Murillo tells Kellaway.¹³

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, 'Conducts of Confession in North Africa (2)' in *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by J. Khalfa & R. J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) 414. Also, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics [1961] 2001) 29 on the colonial world 'divided into compartments' and 'a world cut in two.'

¹² '11 Things About Óscar Murillo: Violent Amnesia', exhibition handout, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 10 May 2019. 'The artist has chosen two words which are not usually place side by side.' This suggests not only the instability of art, life and ideas, but also the distinctive mode of *métaphore filée* and transposition, also present in the language of black existential surrealism (Césaire, Fanon).

¹³ Óscar Murillo interviewed by Kate Kellaway, 'I want to hold up a mirror to this country' in *The Guardian*.

Would it be too far-fetched to propose that Murillo's practice and process subsumes, inverts, and projects the atmosphere of violence, anxiety, and terror onto the art object, which then works to expose the hypocrisy of mastery and dogmatism in a non-dogmatic way? 'I want to hold up a mirror to this country', Murillo says. He now speaks of the UK, 'the tragic hypocrisy of the British people ... This country has no concern for the working people. It happens in the context of art too. You can talk about race all you like, and yet there is no comparable conversation about class.' A mirror is, of course, the very materiality of mimesis. In which art and life are the same. We mimic nature so as to exploit it, just as we exploit each other and ourselves. Can intensified mimicry provide us with a way out?

Consider the mimicry of terror in Colombia or the UK, spoken of in Spanish or in English, which Murillo describes as 'both "second" languages for him.' Unending wars. Wars against nouns: against communism and liberals, war on drugs, on terror and terrorists, Castro-chavismo, rebellious Indians *campesinos* and *guerrilleros*, and now neo-Communism. That is mimesis, a form of trickery and magic. But also a practice and a method, as when Adorno said apropos of Benjamin's work that it responded to the need for everything to 'metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things.' Colombians too refer to the violence that cuts their world in two by means of the ambiguity of the word *limpieza*. 'Sure, *limpieza* as "cleansing" now means to wipe out and kill defenseless people, much the same as a "purge" of the unclean. But ... it is also used -and has a far older history- in healing a person or a home from malignity due to spirit attack or sorcery.' Such healing not only subsumes and contains deadly violence, but also enhances a sense of direction by distinguishing the light of lighthouses from the lights of wreckers' lanterns thereby intensifying the memory of the interrupted past. And in the process affirming an enduring

self in place and time and giving such sense of self over to time, the not-yet, in survivance, as a gift.¹⁴

Perhaps a diary, a sketchbook, or a fieldwork notebook, but also a stitched fabric scribbled over and turn into a collection can play on this ambiguity: that in the process of recording, mirroring, detailing and reflecting the new kind of *limpieza* that attempts to sustain the reign of terror by recreating the system of the unipolar group -racism and exploitation- under the guise of 'law and order', the diary and the sketchbook, but also the artwork object, say Murillo's *Violent Amnesia*, might conserve the older sense of *limpieza* as well, 'displacing the malignity of the events' it depicts and reframes.

Violent Amnesia by Óscar Murillo figures prominently in both the Kellaway interview and the Turner Prize exhibit of the same name. It was made over a period of four years, the result of the kind of practice described above and filmed in 'slow-mo': forced drawing, mark-making, montage, mimesis. But here, the mimetic process is no longer treated like an embarrassing family member, better to be avoided but indispensable at crucial times, as it was by the weighty aesthetic theory of the early critics who took the it up from Benjamin in their 1930's attempts to explain anti-Semitism in the Third Reich and advice the prosecutorial team during the Nuremberg Trials without directly engaging with the question of colonial violence or its boomerang effect.

In a way, Murillo's gift for extended metaphor and the volcanic tension of the unfamiliar juxtaposition comes through in the sort of automatic painting he practices. It involves the painter's whole body, their conscious and unconscious, rather than the one-eye

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, *Law in a Lawless Land. Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) xiii and *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020) 5, on mimesis and for quotations.

of conventional projection. But it would be best to speak of his practice and process in *Violent Amnesia* in terms of non-sensuous correspondences, a Benjaminian term for mimetic links between things and activities not obviously mimetically related. Like geometric figures and birds and arrows and Latino newspapers and airplanes. Only that the bird wing and that of the airplane mean we are flying faster and higher than ever, 'mimetic beings in wonderlands of what until recently was pure make-believe' coming to terms that the far-fetched idea that the real was really made up has become real. Not a second but a third nature.

If you allow this reconsideration of Murillo's practice and process in the light of reframed mimesis, then it would not seem too fanciful to speak of it as producing objects that both incarnate and reflect upon our current dispensation as some kind of 'metamorphic sublime.' Our situation of constant, accelerated, digital transformation, mirroring, and Chinese boxes. And running through all this is indeed the kind of colonial endowment of mimicry that Michael Taussig, cited above, who coined the term 'law in a lawless land' to speak of terror in Colombia and elsewhere, calls 'mimetic excess.' In this illumination, art like Murillo's exceeds the mimesis used to colonise nature from the shaman's drugs and dances, cutting in two terrains and populations, in an intensified moment in a burst of sheer energy and creativity that can be called, again with Taussig and his Colombian interlocutors, the mastery of non-mastery.¹⁵

Like other pieces, *Violent Amnesia* was made on the floor of the studio. This allowed the painter to step over and around it, allowing the fabric to subsume dirt, dust, oil, and

¹⁵ Michael Taussig, *The Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*, 9 and 47. My thanks to Juan Felipe García for his own illuminations of this aspect of the metamorphic sublime as the outcome of mimetic excess, which I use in my reading of Murillo's work.

rubbish as well as to transpose the excess energy of the body painting it and the atmosphere around it. Transposing it into a metamorphic sublime. To see Murillo painting or drawing and to see him dancing are one and the same thing.¹⁶

The piece consists of a long black fabric juxtaposed upon another energetically scribbled with graphite geometrical figures. A series of red dotted lines form a semi-circle at the bottom of the fabric which is also painted over with blots of blue, white and green oil and oil stick as well as collaged images of bird figures and a poster captioned 'healthy boy.' A word, broken, is barely legible to the right. The crucial dominant figure, at the top of the piece, is an inverted world map which is missing Europe and North America.

The fabric is hung from a rail as if it were a curtain or a piece of cloth in a clothesline. In fact, at least two or three pieces of fabric have been mixed and sewn together to make this long black textile of textiles. Murillo 'pushes the boundaries of materials,' said the jury that included his name in that year's Turner Prize shortlist. When I visited his studio in Tottenham, a group of elderly women from south-west Colombia were busy putting together these different fabrics with their sewing machines. This is collective work. They used cotton, linen, velvet and other more and less heavy textiles.

Part-patchwork, reminiscent of Afro-Amerindian quilting, part forced drawing and scribble on banners and stitched strips of fabric, I was immediately reminded of a piece I saw as a child in Colombia when the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña, exiled from her homeland after the US-backed coup d'état against the 'revolution within the law' led by the working

¹⁶ Murillo can be seen dancing with friends in Colombia's Cauca Valley at the end of the session 5 of my 2020 *Art & Fire: A Journey in Five Films*, a set of five videos prepared for a course on contemporary art and politics in the Americas together with Hay Festivals, told through visual art and film. Available at <https://www.hayfestival.com/p-16844-art-and-fire-a-journey-in-five-films.aspx>

women of that country, presented *Homenaje a Vietnam (Homage to Vietnam)* during a workshop with children at the Gilberto Alzate Avendaño gallery in Bogotá. Bodies and nature enmeshed in geometrical shapes were painted by her on silk and cotton banners and on strips of fabric hung from bamboo poles to allow the wind to move them in a transposition from the field of battle in Asia to a field in Colombia as well as a metaphorical reference to how struggle moves through spacetime, and how out of vulnerability or injurability something else emerges and becomes: bodies and breathing spaces for pause, cultivation, survivance and resistance. The presence of the women sewing in Murillo's studio made this chance association of memories even more intense and forceful.

Images such as these are evocative of what black surrealist poets like Suzanne and Aimé Césaire called the 'boomerang effect' and anti-colonial critics like Pierre Yoyotte, René Ménénil, Assia Djebar, and Franz Fanon, but also Cecilia Vicuña and Óscar Murillo after them, remarked when they renewed the question: 'what is fascism but colonialism at the heart of traditionally colonialist countries?' What matters here is, precisely, their reframing and rewriting of the question of colonial violence and fascism after that very term and the phenomenon it originally referred to have been so extensively documented and so reviled that it has almost ceased to have any substantial contemporary significance. Especially when looked at from the vantage point and in the context of our world and times. A meltdown world in which artworks that invert religious and geo-political icons, women's power, art that speaks of racism and class, the hopeful search for 'what is not-yet' in the intersection between aesthetic practices and combative ethical discourses, or even the

suggestion to expand healthcare and wear masks in the middle of a pandemic can be called fascist or Nazi.¹⁷

In this respect. Murillo's practice not only pushes the boundaries of materials but moves matter, the matter of history and our world, to the edge of the image frame where the invisible outside and what has been obscured by the visible surface within converge in dualism in itself. His practice and process produces an opening to the inside, to the pathos of the objects that subsume and inscribe the very path, difference and direction. A multiplication of the vectors of orientation.

Thus, the geometry at work in Murillo's practice isn't merely the neo-Aristotelian/Cartesian system of reasoning that early critics in the twentieth century rushed to identify with Enlightenment's relapse into barbarism: 'the technical gift of discovery, talent at organisation, arithmetic dexterity, logical thinking, etc. [that] become reified into products' whose value can be expressed in numbers and prices. A phenomenon that has become clearer as the lines between art and financial capitalism continue to blur, and which Murillo's own artistic trajectory of 'early success' in the art market exemplifies. As such, those critics saw Cartesian ocular-centrism and geometry as an incomplete form of reason. A phase in the history of thought and creativity characteristic of the problematic state of mass capitalist society as represented in what Sigfried Kracauer, cited above, together with

¹⁷ See, Cecilia Vicuña, *Pain Things and Explanations*, exhibition handout (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1973). Also, 'The Quasar,' in *Spit Temple: The Selected performances of Cecilia Vicuña*, ed. and trans. Rosa Alcalá (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012) 119 and her unpublished *El diario estúpido (The Stupid Diary)* for art practice focused on an 'about to happen' and 'not-yet-being' as well as the idea instinctive painting (with Tomás Lago), all cited in her *Seehearing the Enlightened Failure* (Rotterdam and Mexico: Witte de With Publ. 2019) 15-6. Also, Franklin Rosemont & Robin D. G. Kelley (eds.), *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019) 42, 74, 80, and 82-3 for Yoyotte, the Césaires and Ménéil. And, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, for quotes. And A. Césaire [1955] 2000) 41 for 'boomerang effect.'

others in the tradition of Critical Theory analysed in terms the production of ‘mass ornaments.’¹⁸

Murillo’s artwork and trajectory invite us to revisit and reframe an aesthetics that reads in the products of mass culture the socio-economic and geo-political principles that brought them into existence. Which also emphasizes the materiality of critique. Which is to say the composition of the artwork or the text, the medium in which viewers and participants encounter it, as well as its haptic and mnemonic dimension. There is also in Murillo’s practice, I argue, a bridge between materiality and logic (geometry, cartography, visual-spatial reasoning) with the potential to create an interzone or a breathing space between experience and investigation or thought.

This is portrayed most clearly in the use of reverse projection in *Violent Amnesia*, the inverted and incomplete image of the world map. Reverse and rewind. Repeat. Reproduce. Remember. As in a film. As the early aesthetic critics of reification and rule-chain process in the twentieth century observed. But I would not say that Murillo’s artworks are cinematic. Rather, they share their ethical and political orientation with film by reproducing and confronting their viewers and participants with the instability of capitalist/colonial rationalisation and art on the level of visual-spatial or haptic reasoning and through mass-

¹⁸ Sigfried Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 9.2, ed. by Inka Mülder-Bach and Ingrid Belke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp: 2006-2012) 267, cited by Matthew Handelman in *The Mathematical Imagination. On the Origins and Promise of Critical Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) 167-8. For a contextual-historical reading of reverse projection practice that both takes up and critically reflects on the legacy of Cartesian ocular-centrism and natural geometry in the visual traditions of Latin America, where Murillo hails from, with which his work strongly resonates, see Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen. Miradas ch’ixi desde la historia andina* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2015) 283-315 and Edgar Garcia, *Signs of the Americas. A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020) especially 185-217 on the work of artists Cecilia Vicuña and Joaquín Torres-García.

produced media: newspapers, old photos, found images, maps, words, textiles, rubbish, dirt, etc.

The bridge-like orientation towards the creation of an interzone, a border crossing or a threshold in spacetime, is present in Murillo's negative practice and attitude (for instance, his decision not to speak during 'Acc€lerate', instead engaging in defacing, decomposing, reversing, and redrawing the found newspaper masthead, its meaning and sense as direction). His practice is best understood in this light as a metaphoric of space, position, and reverse projection. As offering a way to address the rationality of the mass ornament on its own terms. To locate, contextualise, and confront its implications and place by projecting the object on the metaphysical level of the management of centrality/periphery relations and the geo-politics of progress, law, and order that characterises persistent situations of external and internal colonialism in countries like Colombia or the United Kingdom, instead of dismissing it as a fad or the result of a lowering of the standards of highbrow culture and (monumental) art.

Further, there is a suggestion in Murillo's practice that we can grasp the straight and dotted lines, waves, squiggles, spirals, vortices, and inverted cartographies that appear in his works as not only metaphors and metonymies but also as transpositions. 'One way to approach [the exhibited work] is like reading a poem or walking into a new landscape. Be led by your senses as well as your head,' reads the guide to the Kettle Yard's show.¹⁹

¹⁹ '11 things about Oscar Murillo: Violent Amnesia', available at <https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/about/news/11-things-about-oscar-murillo/> See also, Enrique Dussel, *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (Mexico: Siglo XXI editors, 2017) 8 for metaphoric and Walter Benjamin and 268n22 for the political orientation of Cartesian ocular-centrism in the context of colonial capitalism.

If so, the bridge between materiality and logic created by his artistic practice is also a passage from one sign system to another. It results in a different process: a tertiary poetic/visual process equivalent to what can be called taking a stance or position. More precisely, trans-position.

1. Violent Amnesia: Position & Techniques of Liberation.

In certain poetic, psychotherapeutic, and critical theoretical contexts, terms like 'position' and 'transposition' mean the destruction of the old position and the creation or formation of a different one. This thesis (or thetic) position is a self-reckoning, in the sense that one can never be content with affirmation. That is, neither with the old extensionalist binary dualisms of self-affirmation and negation characteristic of demonstrative logic or the rhetoric of legalist debate nor with self-affirmation or judgment in the manner of court-like condemnation and discriminatory classification from a privileged vantage point, a zero-point of perspective or a vanishing viewpoint. Both forms of perspective and demarcation are insufficient and illusory, even hubristic.

They remind us of the limiting perspective and formalism of the eye of the law or the one-eye of linear or horizontal projection. Abstract processes which are often incarnated in the figures of the renaissance painter that is absent from the scene depicted within his geometrical frame, or the neutral judge in his court. But also, importantly, the impartial spectator of the market. And, crucially, the colonialist metropolis that effaces itself as such, as well as other like figures of the management of centrality.

Instead, to create or bring about something (a space between, a threshold or a crossing of boundaries, a new landscape, or a different institution) from vulnerability, injurability or silence (which are figures of negativity) one must first differentiate positively

between an old falsehood and something new. And then transpose that correct or more just point of departure into real relations. In other words, one needs position.

This is to say that an aesthetic practice such as Murillo's, which gathers the material debris of the process of colonial capitalist mass production together with its geometric and geo-political frame of reference to project, distinguish, differentiate, and create is most emphatically critical. At least in the sense that through the exercise of the capacity for projection and differentiation, through critique in this most emphatic sense, this practice not only inverts the given system of coordinates, the linear perspective and imaginary of centrality, like the world map in which Europe and North America appear dominant and central. It also threatens or negates the movement of unconditional affirmation -the affirmation of the self or 'us' at the centre of an unchanging framework- in the practical sense that it requires that one move to action and that with others one does something to change the given framework, even if what we do is imperfect. Something like doubt or a hesitation, or the ability to stop, to pull the handbrake and deviate from the given 'order' or command.

Such an understanding of practice as position (or, more precisely, transposition) is related to the poetic and the natural projective geometry of someone who enters a new landscape upon crossing the sea with a group of strangers on the lower deck of a slave ship or one who walks into a never before-seen environment with the aim of starting diplomatic negotiations with a non-inert landscape. And, thus, it is also related to the ethical and to justice. For we are called to enter and to act in this situation even before we know the complete picture of the situation.

Positioning practice demands exploration, experimentation, and negotiations. Also, firm interruptions. It demands that we bring about something into being out of the

negativity of our refusals (to speak, to judge, to rush into condemnation). Something like a firm interruption in the process chain of actions, and perhaps also forms of judgment. The 'I rather not to' of Bartleby, to help make the relationalities and global situations visible, however imperfectly. Or to remedy them. To create the improbable interzone, the bridge, the border-crossing and the threshold moment. The zone of salvage and rescue. There, in the zone of not-yet-being

The practice of spatial metaphors, projective geometry, and transposition at work in Murillo's physical, forceful drawing and performance demands that we develop techniques and technologies of liberation. This means to present the state of things and the situation as if in a film-photographic developer bath. Just as montage, or the interruption in a process chain of command that brings the very process and the command into focus in all its wickedness and malice. Or the unusual collection of two words or images. For example, 'violent art' or 'Violent Amnesia'.

Ditto, in certain psychotherapeutic and theoretical contexts, trans-position means the enunciative and denotative positionality that emerges when a person or a group is forced to mark out their very existence and meaning (both significance and orientation) amid a stream of changing semiotic regimes, rule-systems, and systems of coordinates. That is, of course, the situation of forcibly displaced persons and groups obliged to confront changing linguistic, legal, and cosmological systems such as Afro-descendent or indigenous ones in contexts of colonisation, capitalist surplus extraction and what political thinkers like Drucilla Cornell and Jane Ana Gordon among others term creolisation.

Furthermore, positionality and creolisation have been related to a kind of anamnesis, memory, and remembering, 'inasmuch as changing sign systems induce 'considerations of representability' ... That consideration takes place in a consciousness of

contradiction between sign systems.’ A kind of criticality that emerges from the self-aware shift, reversal and inversion in the meaning and orientation of projected images and other signs. For instance, the reversal of the masthead image and name of London’s latino newspaper that can be seen in the film of Murillo’s 2017 GAF performance, from ‘Mundo Latino’ to ‘Mundo Racista’, or the reverse projection of an incomplete world map in his 2019 *Violent Amnesia*.

In contrast, moving from external commentary to material internalisation Óscar engaged in forced drawing. over a found image, the masthead of the leading newspaper of the Latino/a community in London Together with the Forum’s commissioner Shumon Basar we aimed to focus a critical light on the global trade of goods and ideas. Including the artworks traded in this and other art fairs as well as the places that function as the nodes of a globally sprawling and digitally accelerated network as the lines between art and financial racialised capitalism become less and less distinct in the twenty-first century. We wanted to explore how the trade speeded in such a network shape and reshape the world, both as practice and process.

The ‘practice’ in question can be understood as being both methodical and systematising. A way of seeing and organising the world in terms of a frame of reference. A system of coordinates in which everything would have its place. Arguably, such a frame already contains the quantification of what is spatially perceptible -landscapes, environs, people, and materials. As such, it also contains abstraction. At least the kind of abstraction that operates according to the conventions of perspective and geometrical projection that European painters and speculative geographers took up from Arabic sources during the late Middle Ages, imported into the visual arts as well as the arts of surveyance, surveillance, rule, and government, and reinvented as an ultimate frame of reference.

Chief among the arbitrary conventions turned into axioms in such a way of seeing and framing is the projection of the whole of spatially perceptible reality into a zero- or vanishing point which ‘inadvertently, is the painter’s one-eye. However, in this projection not only things appear as a negative or inverted image but the painter himself disappears or is abstracted from the scene framed. And yet the entire scene is projected, orchestrated or composed around that vanishing point which no longer can be seen as the eye of the painter because in fact his perspective is omnipresent in the total arrangement of the artwork. This means the absence of the ego cogito from the cogitatum as a whole. That cogitatum is, evidently, colonialism; colonial-being’.

may even be based on arbitrary axioms, and the management of geo-political centrality vis-à-vis perceived ‘peripheries’. Among them, the place where Óscar and I come from: the ‘torrid zone’.

Here, the arbitrary and the axiomatic go hand in hand, insofar as what claims to be first, original, the centre of visibility and rule pretends to be the arbiter and judge of everything else. on the process anted us to had invited me and Antonia Carver to curate the How to be a practitioner in art and critique, at a time when the ‘line between art and capital is blurrier than ever’? Afro-Colombian, London-based artist Óscar Murillo tends to the latter when describing the current situation. In what follows, I aim to unpack what this characterisation might entail for our understanding and illumination of artistic and political practice nowadays. My engagement is animated by earlier exchanges with Murillo in the context of the 2017 Global Art Forum I co-curated with Shumon Basar and Antonia Carver (which included an impromptu filming of Murillo’s force drawing titled *Slow-mo*), his collaboration with the “Explorations in Art & Human Rights” teaching-and-research project I

lead at Birkbeck College in the University of London, and an emerging conversation in the context of the recent 2021 demonstrations in Colombia.

The theoretical framework for such engagement benefits from observations made by artists such as Carlos Motta and sociologists of art and the image like W. E. B. Du Bois, John Berger, Pascal Gielen and Silvia Rivera. In short, they suggest that “confronted with a world in which conflicts of justice are met with neutral, scientific reasoning” we must ask whether there’s a position that artists and critical thinkers working today can take, confrontational yet inspiring. Further, we need to enquire if such positionality can be creative of institutions. And, furthermore, whether the greater creativity that becomes manifest to the participants when they take position in the moment of protest/demonstration, which can be distinguished from what can be achieved individually and collectively in the pursuit of their regular lives, is only symbolic or can become real and truthful.

Their suggestion resonates with the historical trajectory of intellectual and practical concern with socio-institutional contexts of aesthetic and political imagination. Specifically, the intersection between artistic and therapeutical as well as ethical practices that raise memory and potentiate awareness, build institutions, and fabricate sites for future subjectivities in the present. This direction comes to us from past and present trajectories of institutional analysis, tricontinentalism, black phenomenology, surrealism and existentialism that insist on illuminating the contradictions resulting from the double life that every black, brown & beige person in or coming from the Americas must live.

Namely, being swept by the current of the early twenty-first century while still struggling in the eddies of the sixteenth and seventeenth. From this must arise a painful unconsciousness, “a sense of moral hesitancy fatal for self-confidence, worlds within and

without the veil of color". The constant walking on the tightrope of a double life, with double thoughts, double duties and double fidelities to double truths, double social classes, a double mirrorsoul doubled on show in double images, double words and double ideals, which tempt body and mind to simulation and pretence, or else, to protest and revolt, demonstration and survivance. Are we Colombian or are we Negro *café negro*? Are we Londoner or are we *costeño, pacífico-y-caribeño*? Are we engaged in the double-aimed struggle of the black artisan, or are we a number of people assembled in an obvious and announced place, more or less art/armed, ready for rehearsal? Do we protest to rehearse revolutionary awareness, and if so, what happens in the time between rehearsal and the actual performance? Are we timely or are we vengeance? And if recognition isn't at all possible for us, neither in Britain nor in Colombia, then how to make a spacetime-mattering room of our own? And if we see ourselves the way others see us, which make us void and eclipsed, how to set the controls for the heart of the sun? Are we human or are we dancer? Here and now, these are the tools for undertaking our own illumination of the conditions for instituting art in our conflict-ridden yet "flat" world of neutrality, horizontalism, unconscious bias raising and violent simulation.²⁰

²⁰ Pascal Gielen, "Walking Straight from the Imaginary into the Common Here and Now. The Matter of Aesthetic Justice" in *Aesthetic Justice. Intersecting Artistic and Moral Perspectives*, (Amsterdam: Antennae/Valiz, 2015) 25-41, and, with Niels Van Tomme, in the same volume, "Opening the Quest for Justice", 11 for quotation. Also, Carlos Motta & Niels Van Tomme, "Six Acts, Or an Experimental Approach to Justice", in *Aesthetic Justice. Intersecting Artistic and Moral Perspectives*, ed. by P. Gielen & N Van Tomme (Amsterdam: Antennae/Valiz, 2015) 247-260; Pascal Gielen, *Institutional Attitudes. Instituting Art in a Flat World* (Amsterdam: Antennae/Valiz, 2013) 1-34; Silvia Rivera C. *Sociología de la Imagen*, (2015) 13-31; Michael Taussig, *Law in a Lawless Land* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) xi-xiii, *What Is the Color of the Sacred?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press,) 77-174, and "The Adult's Imagination of the Child's Imagination", in *Aesthetic Subjects*, ed. by P. R. Matthews & D. McWhirter (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 449-468, on colour and doing justice through images. Also, W. E. B.

Lest we slip into historical amnesia, the ongoing erasure of the historical episode of double sight and awareness, let's build upon such questions as resonating rhythms indicative of a common institutional attitude. I propose an encounter between Óscar Murillo's artistic practice, and the decolonising ethical, critical and clinical perspective opened up by Frantz Fanon's questioning of legal-political institutions. "Man is motion", Fanon says. We're dancer, "a movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest; a movement of love, a gift of self", the ultimate choreography step of what "by common accord is called ethical orientation".²¹

The uniqueness and originality of Fanon's phenomenological jurisprudence, aiming to illuminate the tension inherent to the ontogenesis (self-creativity) of Africana subjectivity, art, and institutions in the wake of the socio-historical event of erasure and double-consciousness, has been hitherto ignored. In part, this is because only after the recent publication of his critical and clinical papers the extent of his concern with questions of medical jurisprudence and what he termed a "sociology of perception and imagination" can be best explored. On the basis of his clinical and artistic practice, including the experimental dramatization of the precedence of existence vis-à-vis essence, the examination of the lived experience of the (criminal) act and the problematic nature of the imagery of standardised psychological tests, Fanon concluded that perception and (aesthetic) imagination ought to be a topic for sociology and institutional analysis.

Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bedford, 1997) 31, 155-156 for quotes and paraphrases.

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by C. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 41.

How promising. Not only because of the originality of the sociogenic ethno-psychiatric perspective on politics and aesthetic instituting he pioneered and bequeathed to us. Also, because such an approach helps us opening up a whole new continent of research for theory and practice. It would be tantamount to creating an (in)discipline in the intersection between artistic and moral-political perspectives. A different one, focused on double-sight and awareness as it moves from demonstrations of a force scarcely used to its realisation. This means tackling the problem of justice not only in terms of our capacities to intensify historical possibilities and aesthetic ideas here and now, but to do so in the concrete context of self-creative responses to the ongoing globalisation of the late colonial settler condition that take account of the delay, even failure/faultline (*falla* in Spanish), between demonstration-rehearsals of revolutionary awareness and the real performance.²²

At stake here is the need to identify the conditions of not only meaning but also sense-making and orientation in a “flat” world in which the relation between causes and effects (of injustice) may have been inverted: before, the task of institutions, governments, law and aesthetic ideas was to rule over the causes in sovereign fashion. But in (late) modernity the task seems to be to control the effects and defend a core population against them, in militaristic fashion (i. e., by means of warfare or lawfare) if necessary. This defensive axiom seems to apply to every domain nowadays: from economy to ecology, from

²² Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by J. Khalifa & R. J. C. Young (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2018) 427-432; Silvia Rivera C. (n1) 14-31. Also, Ghassan Hage, *Alter-politics. Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2011) e-book loc 264-611. Also, John Berger, “The Nature of Mass Demonstrations”, in *International Socialism*, 1st series, no. 34, Autumn 1968, re-published in *Counterfire.org* on 5 June 2021, for the distinction between demonstrations as rehearsals of revolutionary awareness, which visually anticipate it, and the real performance, at <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/history/17860-john-berger-the-nature-of-mass-demonstrations> .

foreign and military politics to the police, and from moral world-images to infotainment, art-markets and spectacle.

The resulting tension between the government of effects and the government of causes seems to determine the current timespace of socio-political struggle as well as the point where the intersection between moral and artistic practices might occur either as rehearsal (for instance, protests and demonstrations) or the real thing. At the heart of this tension lies a main contradiction between the core-population that provides the drive and fuel for the defensive apparatus of the state and another people under construction, with double sight, that wishes to be born but isn't here, not yet, ambiguous, which desires to move from the position of being an object for another to the position-in-situation of an embodied subject that in viewing the world creates meaning and historical sense. The job of which is to insist on the non-necessity and insufficiency of the apparatus of coercion as a condition of power and more or less vertical institutions. Let's speak, in other words, of both the failings and the possibilities facing a sense-thinking consciousness engaged in the work of constituting a different world in the conditions of the present one.²³

2. Art World Making.

What does it mean to speak of "failures" and "possibilities" for bringing about a third world out of the world cut in two of colonial and global violence? What does it mean to design and institute the pluriverse? On the one hand, it means to point in the direction of the ongoing decoupling between global colonial/capitalism and the mathematical

²³ See on this, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Untimely, Again", in Pierre Clastres's *Archaeology of Violence* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010) 21 citing Deleuze and Clastres on the problem of the non-necessary association of power with coercion, and, David Graeber & Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2017) 462-464.

imagination of science (geometry, natural sciences, art & the humanities) led by a divergence of interests between certain sections of the global capitalist class as well as its core population and those producing meaningful-and-orienting scientific knowledge from a position of radical investment (for instance, on climate change, the boomerang effect of racism, or the impact of pandemics intersecting economic inequality). As a result, obscurantism, denialism, cultures of irrationalism and post-fascist militarism have become the order of the day, together with an (anti)institutional attitude transforming citizen-subjects into a core-population of conscripts of a (war-like) cause, which shouldn't be questioned, in combat against a dispersal of enemies.

If these are the obstacles, where are, on the other hand, the possibilities? The kind of investigative practice proposed here, positionality and transposition, hand in hand with the artistic practice of Oscar Murillo, has its starting point in an existentialist/phenomenological lesson. That all imagination appears against the background of a world [*sur fond the monde*, in French] but, reciprocally, all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary.

Philosophically speaking, this is an illuminating way of posing the problem of sense. Put simply, making sense is not just a matter of clarifying the significance of what we say to each other about the world seeking a transparent, ultimate, neutral grounding, but also, or rather, a matter of direction, differentiation and orientation. To the crucial question "where do we go from here?" we cannot provide an answer based on the assumed certainty of neutral languages, polling numbers and calculated trends. Because futurology is not yet a science based on empirical proof, moral science and politics will have to rely on the work of artists, philosophers and other speculative minds travelling against the flow of time. They explore "what can be", and rehearse such explorations, experimentally, in demonstrations

against chiefs and so-called experts measuring and surveying “what has been” and “what just is”. The latter foreclose the production of political subjectivities in favour of the conscript, a neutralised and pacified subjectivity. In contrast, only the former produce structural scientific knowledge about different experiences of sociality and a different practice of humanity.

It is the case that aesthetic presentations and ideas have not only empathetic but also anticipatory and emphatic (or intensifying) power. When they happen in mass demonstrations, they reveal the truth of the latter in at least two senses: First, as rehearsals for revolution. Not tactical, but rehearsals of revolutionary awareness. Second, as artificial stage-timespaces breaking up with and into ordinary life. The value and intensity of a demonstration, which varies, is the result of its artificiality, for therein lies its anticipatory, visualising, and rehearsing properties. Further, however spontaneous it may seem, a mass demonstration can be distinguished from a purely spontaneous or horizontal crowd. Not only because it gathers in public to create its function, instead of responding to one: “in this, it differs from any assembly of workers within their place of work ... or from any crowd of spectators”, including art-spectators. Also, because its self-creativity, the anticipatory, prophetic or visualising properties of art in mass demonstrations, isn’t an externalising projection by society of power as nature, but rather, points in the direction of the non-separation of nature and society, body and environment.²⁴

Consider that demonstrations often take place as near as possible to some symbolic centre, either civil or sacred like a monument, a tree or a river, a square or a community centre, and demonstrators are addressed by such landscapes. They cut off such timespaces

²⁴ Berger (n3).

without being able to occupy them permanently, transforming them into a temporary stage on which they dramatize the power they not yet have. Their targets are seldom strategic ones -like barracks, courts or the presidential palace. Rather, it's "the demonstrator's view of the city surrounding their stage [that] also changes". And since their embodied subjectivity is a viewing of the world, it changes too. Their numbers cease to be numbers "and become the evidence of their senses, the conclusions of their imagination. The larger the demonstration, the more powerful and immediate (visible, audible, tangible) a metaphor it becomes" for their total collective strength, making present to each other and to themselves those who are absent.²⁵

This way of simultaneously extending and giving body to an abstraction, which is what artistic practices do in demonstrations-as-revolutionary-rehearsals, makes participants "more positively aware of how they belong to a class". Moreover, this non-separation between those present and absent as well as between demonstrators and the (urban) landscapes that address them, makes all participants-inhabitants of the cosmos art/ificially potential occupants of the deictical "first person" position. In this case, class-belonging ceases to imply merely a common suffering or victimhood (being object or prey). Instead, it implies a common possibility visible in the schemas of polarity that present political relations. In fact, here, all relations (including relations with the surrounding city and natural

²⁵ J Berger (n3) saying of participants that "they begin to recognise that the function of their class need no longer be limited: that it, too, like the demonstration itself, can create its own function". For a cross-reading of revolutionary rehearsals and ethnographic evidence of what happens in rituals and events outside "the law of the state", see E Viveiros de Castro (n4) 47 and Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words. The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) 55-82.

environs) are socio-political relations schematised in terms of polarity. This makes humanity, personhood, and subjectivity positions marked by reciprocity and alterity.²⁶

Because of that, aesthetic presentations are often more convincing and influential than governance-by-numbers, forensic procedures, statements of certainty, risk-assessments of and economically rational scenarios of the future. The rules for life are drawn up by “projecting them onto a possibly different (either utopian or dystopian) [social] world ... An act of justice intervenes [here] at the exact moment between a formulated set of ethics” or “social myths”, as Ernesto Laclau calls them, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a generally accepted, or rather, an anticipatory-instituting vision of the future. If so, “a claim for justice can only be made when the distinction between good and evil has already been made”. Even if that distinction itself has no significance. Even if it does not provide us with complete knowledge and all the details of a blueprint of society, such as a classical utopia, but only a few simple images that can serve as a catalyst for change, conscience, metaphorical intensification and action. Even when its value is zero, such differentiation serves as an orientation for counting and accounting in the same way that the sense of a vector is its direction. “Only then can a sense of justice arise and only then does it become possible to draw the line between justice and injustice at all”.²⁷

Therefore, an act of justice -be it a verdict in a peoples’ tribunal or a denunciation in a demonstration- not only happens in the name of some image of the future we escape into. Perhaps not at all. Instead, we return from such images of fullness to come, but not

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ P Gielen (n1) 27. Also, Ernesto Laclau, “Ethics, Normativity and the Heteronomy of the Law”, in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014) 79-100, 127-138, for the source of some paraphrases in this paragraph and, especially, the notion of “social myth” and mythic matter deployed here. Importantly, “catalyst” is the precise word used by Óscar Murillo during our conversations on the 2021 general strike in Colombia.

yet, to emphasize what is lacking in the present. To catalyse and galvanise the imagination of a people under construction into action. To make empathetically present to such people and to intensify the moments in the present, temporary though they may be, when we come together to denounce such lack and glimpse at another possibility just as the view of the city surrounding the demonstrators' stage also changes. We gather in a peoples' court or take to the streets and demonstrate not simply because there is a particular imaginary that we wish to realize but because that gathering moment must be made indelible, to confirm a specific ethics and at the same time fabricate, confirm and intensify together with others the possibility of a singular-pluriversal future. This creativity may be "desperate in origin" as Berger says, and very costly, but it temporarily changes the outlook. Participants present and absent "become corporately aware that it is they ... who have built the city and who maintain it. They see it through different eyes". As their product, confirming their potential and possibilities rather than foreclosing them.²⁸

An act of justice, for instance a demonstration and the general strike, isn't merely an occurrence. It's also, or rather, the image of a fullness that is the positive reverse of the current situation experienced as the denial of such fullness, and the transition from such envisioned fullness to the lived experience and visualisation of lack as well as a trans-motion from there to actualising justice. That transition isn't logical, it doesn't happen without delay or the possibility of failure, and there's no logical or neutrally transparent transition from the lived experience and view of lack to justice-as-fullness that would by itself remedy such deprivation. It requires concrete contents linking up specific struggles and demands, emptying them out of their particularistic tendencies and catalysing them, in retrospect, as

²⁸ J Berger (n3).

not only the living experience of the unconditioned but also as orientation, something we can invest on (as designs for a pluriverse) in a world conditioned by coercion and particular interests.²⁹

Of course, if such transition from the ethical experience to the normative-institutional isn't logical (in the limiting sense of extensionalist or dualist logic) then it requires investment, radical investment in a different beginning. In short, it requires an act. Thus, it can be said of an act of justice that it is a performative act. It activates, confirms and intensifies ethical differentiations and a sense of orientation through pronouncements, imaginings, investments, principles (in the sense of a different beginning) and actual behaviour or presentations.

In jurisprudential-political terms, this sense-thinking constitutes an illumination of the question of justice in terms of its aesthetic and imaginary possibilities (or lack thereof) in concrete contexts. If justice is a matter of projecting a fullness against the background of current lack or deficiency of being, then the apparent indeterminacy or emptiness of visualising-projection devices (tests, drawings, inscribed lines, photographs, found or moving images and so on, such as the ones that animate Murillo's artistic practice) must be inscribed within a determinant spatiotemporal framework animated by the socio-cultural and econo-political dynamisms (rituals, performative gatherings in galleries or biennales, street demonstrations in which the aesthetic element is paramount) that affect the psyche and structure "what can be". This is to say, in other words, that when considered sequentially justice comes after ethics and before utopia.

²⁹ See Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse. Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), and A Appadurai (n6).

Bearing in mind that “what can be” is the ultimate domain of risk-uncertainty, it is important to acknowledge as well that from the perspective of the conscript citizenship (this sort of masculine, assertively mono-cultural warrior subjectivity) that is being advanced by today’s late (neo-liberal, neo-colonial, post-fascist) settler colonial/capitalism, it is precisely this domain of reality that we have called “what can be” that is seen increasingly as a temporal variation on the spatial threat represented by the dispersal of enemies (the Muslim other, the communist, the internal enemy, the guerrilla, the traitor, etc.). From that perspective critical artists, philosophers and other speculative minds who concern themselves with pronouncements about “what can be” tend to be dismissed as, at best, unrealistic or intemperate or “polarising”, and at worst romantics who not only flee from the present but threaten to bring about totalitarian futures based on an aesthetic design that would subordinate the common good to private ambitions.

Against such accusations it is crucial to keep in mind the link between aesthetic justice and the practical idea of travel or trans-motion. The examination of that link is one of the most persistent features of Óscar Murillo’s art, one that resonates within a historical trajectory going back to pre-Columbian times. Calling a recent exhibition “Violent Amnesia” is a way to remind us that memory-work is not about romanticism or monumentalism vis-à-vis the past or what has been that brought us to what just is. It is, actually, the very opposite of that monumentality (and of monumental art) as it inhabits the contradictions of the present -vulnerability, the (art) market, commodification- and journeys back to the present from a fictitious because imagined future. To speak of a violent amnesia is to be reminded of how difficult that return trip has become. Murillo’s violent art, the art of violent amnesia, explores world-making practices of travel, demonstrations and trans-motion deemed useless and unrealistic, if not a threat, under the current dispensation. It does so at the

point where artistic practices intersect and inhabit the tension with artwork-as-commodity or financial discourses. It may even incarnate that contradiction.³⁰

3. Violent Erasure and the Erasure of Violence.

As seen in the previous section, ideas of justice always need to be grounded in a future vision of society (retro-futurist, the ground of the ought free from the determinations of the present) or inscribed within space-time-mattering frameworks. But that's the very thing withheld from us in the present condition. As I've argued in *What If Latin America Ruled the World?* (2010) the globalisation of the late colonial settler condition has inverted the familiar hierarchical relationship between the North and the Global South or the West and the Rest taken for granted by Euro-moderns. If modernity was supposed to be the time when the nations of the West showed the Rest an image of their own future, nowadays the opposite is happening. That boomerang effect, the return trip from the violence, the obstacles, failures and possibilities over there to the common here and now, which would problematise the currently presumed association of power with coercion, is what the Right and our righteous state politicians as well as so-called experts need to hide.

De-industrialisation, the imbalance between tertiary and primary sectors (in which extractivist mining and agroindustry remain as the only "real" of the economy), the primacy of expository value and flashy consumption fuelling investment in cultural capital, the art-

³⁰ Ó Murillo, "I Want to Hold Up a Mirror to this Country", interview by Kate Kellaway in *The Guardian*, posted 16 June 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/16/oscar-murillo-interview-turner-prize-hold-a-mirror-to-this-country>. Also, Gerald Vizenor, "The Unmissable: Transmotion in Native Stories and Literature", in *Transmotion*, 1(1), 63. (2015). <https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.143>

market boom and infotainment industries, the capture of humanitarian-democratic institutions by missionary-like moral sentiments and the interests of investors (making corruption in politics more prevalent) is no longer, if it ever was, an exclusive feature of the so-called developing societies of the former Third World or the Global South. The violence that would've been reserved for the peripheries and the "brutes" out there in years past, has now returned to the metropolis of the world.

The "boomerang effect" predicted by Latin American artists and thinkers like Joaquín Torres-García, Aimé or Suzanne Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Orlando Fals-Borda has taken place. "You know what's going on here, an institutional collapse", Óscar tells me on the phone from his hometown, La Paila, located in one of the most beautiful spots of the ecological wonder that is the north of the Cauca Valley, west of Bogotá in the Pacific coast of Colombia. "The introduction of neoliberal policies some thirty years ago destroyed people's aspirations to those basic things that by right, for the mere reason of being human, have always been fundamental ... The [conservative] revolution and the economic as well as institutional collapse that began some thirty years ago has now left people exposed ... abandoned", he says. But if thirty or forty years ago this diagnostic would've been taken for granted, indeed expected as a sign of the supposed backwardness of these parts of the world, nowadays it must be seen as a memory coming back from the future. The small town of La Paila is a sign, an index of the shape of things to come, coming back home to roost in the West.³¹

³¹ Óscar Murillo in conversation with Óscar Guardiola-Rivera, 30 May 2021. See Orlando Fals-Borda, "El Tercer Mundo y la reorientación de las ciencias contemporáneas" [1990], in *Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO/Siglo XXI Editores, 2015) 367-384; Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire et al. "Voice of the Oracle" [1942], René Ménélik, "Introduction to the Marvelous" and "Poetry, Jazz & Freedom" in *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. by F. Rosemont & Robin D. G.

The result is a simple yet spectacular tension, hidden in plain view. No longer the simplistic dualism of North/South, West-versus-East, Black/White but the fact that such binary oppositions are anything but a simply dual object, or even simply an object. Perhaps it may not even be an opposition after all. When you look at the inverted world map in Murillo's multi-media canvas *violent amnesia* included in the Kettle's Yard 2019 exhibition of the same name, what hits you, on the one hand, is the reality of the limits of both the resources and imaginary of dualist extensional logic, and on the other hand the force of the multidimensional relationships that perfuse and constitute the matter he draws and enacts performatively.

The former -dualist extensional logic- is the logic of empire and racialisation. It frames the systematization of space and visibility according to the dualistic conventions of linear perspective that helped establishing the techniques for defensive control of the territory and its populations. At the same time, it constituted the ethical and aesthetic framework of the fortitude/fortress mentality (*fortaleza*, in Spanish) incarnated in the settler-colonial practices and militaristic methods applied in these parts of the world by Iberian and other empires. It is this mentality and those practices and methods that, in the wake of so-called neoliberalism, economic and psychic misery, counterinsurgency, defensive social control and repression technologies used first in colonial settings, as laboratories, have gone global and are now being brought back to the former imperial metropolis. The latter is the content, the matter in excess of the aesthetic and ethical institutional forms inherited from colonial institutions and mentality. Mythic matter. The general strike.

Kelley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 80-84; A Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press); and, F Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, [1961] 2001) 75-84 for the boomerang effect.

It is such excess, this material tension, what inhabits Murillo's artistic practice. As such, it cannot be separated from the social struggles taking place nowadays in the Cauca Valley, which have turned places like this into a vector of orientation in the time of the globalisation of the late colonial settler condition. The features that constituted the specificity of Iberian and other imperial European mentalities as besieged civilised cultures and defensive militaristic institutions, repeated thereafter in the internal colonial projects of Zionist Israel, white South Africa, Manifest Destiny America and counterinsurgent mestizo Latin America, which constitute the history of places like the Cauca Valley where Murillo hails from as well as his personal biography, are fast becoming determinant for all Western cultures and institutions today.

"These nationalist warrior cultures of the twentieth century were already showing the West an image of its future, as it has come to be today", Ghassan Hage concurs. His insight resonates with Óscar's view of the Cauca Valley: "People have been left exposed, abandoned ... without social security, no health or education institutional infrastructure ... Add to that drug-trafficking, which infiltrated and captured democratic institutions like an illness or a virus and has now metastasized". Although the devastating impact of the drug industry is well known, what remains hitherto ignored is the extent to which drug-trafficking mutated in the last thirty years. Far from being the public enemy number one it once was, as depicted in popular tv series and documentaries, it has become deeply enmeshed within the political culture of the establishment. No longer an industry but a global corporate-like multinational, having confessed some of its crimes (without giving up its weapons) and undergone a sort of conversion, it's now the most recent incarnation -in the body politic- of the nationalist warrior cultures of mestizo Latin America in its late, zombie colonial phase. A

body politic ridden with contradictory symptoms; the “metastasized body” described by Óscar Murillo, which his artistic practice does justice to.³²

Chief among such contradictions is the tension between self-victimizing acts of confession (organised around the expository value of monumental art and institutional *mea culpas*, supposedly leading to conversion or re-integration) and assertive mono-culturalism. It’s a concrete phenomenon. To be understood correctly, it must be attributed to a particular, self-affirmative class-location. Such is the core-population that in its process of confession, conversion and reintegration into traditional familiar society has asserted itself as the very measure and (medical) safeguard of invulnerability, of what matters or survives and what does not, what lives and what is left to die. It has supplanted and simulates the body politic as a whole.

“Perhaps what the richest try to buy with their plundered wealth is the fiction of invulnerability”, says Colombian art critic Elena Sánchez, reflecting on the same reality that Óscar’s artistic practices respond to. “That’s why they pay for private armies that kill and forcibly displace those opposed to their designs ... The model often called ‘neoliberalism’ has produced in places like Colombia a far more engrained form of assertive individualism, which is a fiction. One based on a program of alienation and extermination that preceded and sustains it”. Conversely, the bodies set in trans-motion during the Colombian 2021 demonstrations and general strike (a stoppage or *paro*, in Latin American Spanish) are,

³² G Hage (n3) ebook loc 309. Also, Ó Murillo in conversation with O Guardiola-Rivera, 30 May 2021, for quotations. See also, Elena Sánchez Velandia, “País en paro, cuerpos en movimiento”, in *Revista Hekatombe*, posted 31 May 2021, available at <https://www.revistahekatombe.com.co/pais-en-paro-cuerpos-en-movimiento/> for a similar reading of the body exposed to death in the absence of health institutions and, conversely, a psychedelic illumination of “doing justice” as ritual healing through visualising aesthetic and political practices performed in common (protest, social struggle).

precisely, the alienated, racialised bodies of the subordinate classes Sánchez calls “subterranean”.

The term is very fitting. On the one hand, it evokes the chthonic justice appealed to by some of the oldest figurations of the very idea of justice, *Ma’at* in the *Hunefer Papyrus* or *Antigone* in Sophocles’ namesake tragedy. On the other, it evokes the hallucinatory imaginings associated to the ingestion of earthly psychedelics as part of Amerindian visualising rituals and trickster-prophetic practices. This is the figure that political anthropologists working in the region for the last seventy years or so call “the political ally”. She’s the associate “who lives elsewhere, halfway between the local, co-resident group and enemy groups ... Everything turns around the ally, the third term that permits the conversion [the transition] of an internal indivision [mono-cultural particularisation] into an external fragmentation” that breaks given historical hierarchies or inheritances and blurs constituted dualisms.³³

In this respect, the artificiality of the aesthetic trickster-techniques used in demonstrations opposes naturalism. The latter assumes an institutional foundational, grounding dichotomy between objective nature or “reality” and subjective culture (multi- or mono-culture). In contrast, the acts of the prophet, the trickster-performer or the political ally in demonstrations posit an inter-temporal, inter-subjective and personalized pluriverse in which the ocular-centrism of the Cartesian gaze and its constitutive split between figure and ground, spectator and object, people and landscape, or person and thing is rendered spurious and dissolved. Isn’t this cosmos, in which dirt, earth, plants, animals, machines and technically-reproduced images reappear as memory-fragments and agents, what struggles

³³ E Viveiros de Castro (n4) 42-43.

to appear in Murillo's artwork? Crucially, if that's the case, it's important to keep in mind that in such artistic practices, the primacy of the rule over the effects-cause relationship is displaced or replaced by intentional causation and social agency. It is in that sense that we can perhaps understand best Murillo's claim that the content of his artistic practice is social investigation.³⁴

The prophet/political ally that alone or with others announces truth and denounces injustice is a common feature in mythical matter, performing and storytelling practices, not only Amerindian or Afro. But in this case, it's accompanied by a visualisation that is hetero-utopian in the sense that it's intended as vector of orientation, realization-comparison, direction and action. Which action/direction? The non-separation of nature and society, the living in combat with the dead (and those who administer death) and against the exteriorisation by society of power (the power over the effects, to let die and memorialise the dead in the monumental shape of war heroes) as nature.

The non-separation of nature and society is the fiction to be enacted as non-fiction by the living who demonstrate and in doing so appear as such. As existants coming from below and from the future. Subterranean, young and denigrated bodies. The name of that fiction-becoming-non-fiction is "what can be". It is opposed to the image coming from above and from the past, taken and reproduced as non-fiction by administrators, chiefs and experts who declare themselves as the guardians of "realism" and the real world, the whole of it, even though it is in fact a fiction. That is, the fiction of ancestry, of exclusive cultural legacy, inheritance, and a "world without others". A fiction on the basis of which the law of

³⁴ See Deborah Danowski & Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Ha mundo por vir?* (Florianopolis and São Paulo: ISA/Cultura e Barbarie Editora, 2015) 22-26, 92-100, or *The Ends of the World*, trans. R. Guimaraes Nunes (Cambridge: Polity, 2017) 68-69. Also, Ó Murillo (n11) for his art-work as "social investigation".

the state and its hierarchy is built and defended as a law of inheritance by the richest who denigrate, kill or administer death and thereafter confess so as to be reintegrated into “good” society, its hierarchy and ancestry (as “natural” mono-culture).

I’m interested in the rhythms resonating between Sánchez’s (art) criticism of Colombian society, articulated as a set of anthropographic body oppositions (terranean/subterranean, above/below, fiction/non-fiction, trans-motion/*paro*) and Murillo’s materiality. Both the materials he uses in his artistic practice and the mythic matter, described above, which such practice constantly refers and responds to as if trying to visualize it, to do justice to. Materials pushed to the limit in action, such as dirt, earth, dust, filth, graphite, oil and oil stick, soiled fabrics and so on. The mythic matter is a cosmopolitics in combat with the law of inheritance, referred to, also, by one of Óscar Murillo’s favourite artists, the Uruguayan draughtsman and painter Joaquín Torres-García, himself a prophet, harlequin, trickster, futurist, primitivist, and cross-dresser. The latter’s artworks were emblems of historical alienations, but ones that, contradictorily, made wearable (in dresses, goods, icons and fashionable designs) a sign of alterity or what Claude Lévi-Strauss called a while ago the “circle from which there is no escape -the first thing [that] we see as we travel round the world [which] is our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind”.³⁵

Like Murillo’s own artwork and Sánchez’s art criticism, these matter and materials also drew attention to the rollicking dislocation of signs from their ordinary circuits of legibility, the meeting of cultures (Native, Afro, European mestizo, Asian) in an unequal

³⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (London: Penguin Classics, [1955] 2011) 38, also quoted by Edgar García in *Signs of the Americas* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020) xii, in the context of an analysis of Torres-García’s “profane illumination”.

context, which creates not only the consciousness but also the conscience, sense-thinking and political imaginary of conflict and contradiction. Political theorists, anthropologists and sociologists of the image have variously referred to this phenomenon as “double-awareness”, “creolization”, “transculturation”, or as the “messy”, “motley” montage and gaze of urbandean peoples in combat with the technocratic and necropolitical gaze of older and newer upper classes carrying out the project of internal colonialism. But it is the former, peoples under construction, who fabricate the future, not the latter, despite what they would (and would like us to) think.

4. First Time as (Baroque) Tragedy ...

In other words, the story of the globalisation of the late colonial settler condition is being told in the seemingly opposite but in fact complementary registers of post-modern melodrama and baroque tragedy. And it is being shown, even televised in newsreels and other “realist” media in accordance with the conventions of ocular-centrism and linear perspective. Those representations, which have come to dominate the global art and infotainment landscape, the “white world” referred to by Carole Jerome Orr and the CBC broadcast producers during their 1977 exchange with Lévi-Strauss, perpetrate violence at the same time as they seek to erase all traces of it, mobilizing guilt and acts of confession (including so-called “white guilt”) and keep the economic benefits accrued as a result of such history of violence in the hands of its perpetrators.³⁶

³⁶ In contrast, the protest will not be televised, but it will be captured on smartphone cameras, cut-up and cut-in and, as such, it will be sampled. See on this Ó Guardiola-Rivera, “La protesta será sampleada”, in *El Espectador*, posted 5 May 2021, available at <https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/columnistas/oscar-guardiola-rivera/la-protuesta-sera-sampleada-column/> Also, C Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London & New York: Routledge, 1978) for the exchange with Jerome Orr.

This is the tension, a contradiction that accounts for the peculiar fact that whereas politics and the mass art/infotainment world sentimentalise events and “are brimming with moralism”, they (not only them, but also academia) have tended to retreat into a strict form of positivist empiricism in order to defend and assert themselves vis-à-vis real and perceived attacks on truth by those vying for power. They “hope to maintain their legitimacy through a dry exposition that almost seems indifferent”. To be precise, “in today’s political rhetoric, a nearly sterile technocratic administrator’s jargon -the likes of ‘the budget must be balanced’-“ has taken over and is occasionally alternated with the most deprecatory statements – the likes of “scum from the suburbs”, “chavs”, “vandals”, “contaminant” immigrants, “*indios*” to be hunted by “good citizens” dressed in pristine white, and the far more ambiguous equivalence-signifier “all lives matter” whose actual signified is that black and otherwise denigrated lives don’t count and do not matter.³⁷

This situation has come about in parallel with the transposition of the concrete and universalist drive that characterised the politics of human rights as well as the struggle for grander justice, from the register of decolonisation and tri-continental mass political mobilization of the 1960s-70s to that of mass “dividual” image-consumption. The latter corresponds to the abstract humanitarianism and the kind of call-out culture that has become so familiar to us these days. It focuses on more or less spectacular cases of particular injustice, individual guilt and lack of correctness, or the perversion of institutional politics, but setting aside any investigation into the root causes of structural violence and injustice deemed useless, unrealistic or elitist. It is assumed that such cases of perversion, corruption and guilt call for surface procedures, chest-beating, apologies and acts of

³⁷ See Gielen & Van Tomme (n1) 10; Van Tomme & Motta (n1) 247-260. Also, G Hage (n3) Part I.

“confession”, which alone would suffice. All the more so if they take place before the ever-vigilant eye of the media and its pacified-conscript publics.

The eye of the media has effectively supplanted (or simulates) the eye of the law, its assemblies, courts and tribunals. Parliament is no longer the site of the construction of a concrete people with concrete and material desires but a site of spectacle, a shouting match between more or less media-savvy clownish figures some of which appeal to the forensic tools and procedures that would expose the secret and destroy it, conducted in accordance to the conventions of interminable dialectic and juristic debate, seeking no resolution. The phrase “the tribunal of public opinion” is no longer metaphorical but literal. It is supposed that such rituals would suffice to cleanse the slate of social relations thereby allowing us to achieve unity, reintegration, and move on beyond conflict into harmony. In a phrase, not only to confess and forgive but also to forget and erase.

This is a nihilistic aspiration, longing for grounds, last judgment, and belonging after the geological shifting of all grounds. To the point of turning the very absence of ground or an ultimate point of reference into yet another ultimate point of reference. That is what the title of Murillo’s Turner-prize works and exhibition, *Violent Amnesia*, taken from one of his pieces as we learned before, brings to our senses. It raises the question: What is it that would be in need of such forgetfulness? History, of course. Not the great glorious past of conservative self-defence mentality, comprising “what has been” and “what just is”. But the last thirty or so years of his-story. Or to be precise, the dimension of “what can be” in history. The possibilities in/of universal history.

The displacement of self-defence mentality and assertive mono-culturalism from the territorial dimension to the historical appears as a temporal variation on the theme of spatial dislocation, displacement and defensiveness vis-à-vis perceived spatial threats. This

theme is central to Murillo's linking of the practical idea of travel to (as a presupposition or condition of possibility for) aesthetic justice. This would be, precisely, the sense of possibility inherent to and latent in the multiple efforts made by heterogeneous, perhaps even previously unconnected peoples whose existential boundaries have had to become more porous and reorganised as a consequence of violence. Their variegated efforts to produce knowledges not only more able to make sense of the times, but also, digging deeply into their various historical trajectories, to intensify the interrupted projects of the future-in-the-present, the *Indoamérica* of Joaquín Torres-García's painting or his pen and ink drawing *América invertida* (which reappears and is re-invented in Murillo's *violent amnesia* and *Tamawuj*) so as to be able to imagine and provide themselves with a sense of orientation towards a different future. This is a sense of re-birth that refuses assimilation or (re)integration and acts as a principle.

After all, in spite of what the visual conventions of the white world would have us believe neither assimilation nor re-integration in some harmonious "new time" were ever possible for those who were not thought as an integral part of the community, to begin with. Further, "principle" indicates here not just the image of the idea of a new time but a different beginning. An image for action. At the same time, the principle is capable of leading that idea to its realization in action in the common here and now. It's, therefore, a (categorical) image that shows us the direction to follow. A moral image of freedom, which carries worlds within it and can open up this world to other historical trajectories, to make ours Drucilla Cornell's language. Seen this way, Murillo's art can be gathered together with those works that in the present prevent us from confusing "what just is" with "justice", and it is in that sense that it is not entirely coincidental that his painting *Tamawuj* was included

in the reopening exhibition at Kettle's Yard back in 2018, fittingly titled "Actions. The image of the world can be different".³⁸

Murillo's art responds to and takes such challenges head on. Here's an artist who questions the familiar sense in which artworks in today's world tend to be seen as the monumental lighthouses that project the light of the Enlightenment, for in fact they may be working as wrecker's lanterns. Let's propose here an analogy between the critique of art-as-lighthouses (or monumental art) in Murillo's artistic practice with Fanon's clinical critique of the views and viewpoints inscribed in the white-card images of all-too-modern standardised psychological tests among other forms of visual testing and documentation (including mass media). The latter too are supposed to serve as "scientific" or enlightened media of identification, but in fact function as and provoke disorienting identification. Instead of the essence of liberty or freedom, we must see them, most humbly, as pathologies of liberty.³⁹

The point of the analogy is to highlight the fact that under the conditions of globalised settler colonialism, interventionism and self-colonisation we seem unable to differentiate the wrecker's lanterns from legitimate lighthouses. We cannot negotiate difference, orientation and produce trust. In this (flattening, disoriented, forgetful or disavowing) culture, words, images and other artwork-atoms are endowed with the almost alchemical property of facilitating the transmutation of people's feelings and emotions into the gold standard – to switch from apathy to empathy, as human rights do-gooders would say. More often than not, however, this actually means empathic identification with the

³⁸ Drucilla Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom. A Future for Critical Theory* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 11-38, 75-136. Also, *Oscar Murillo: Violent Amnesia*, in <https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/events/oscar-murillo/>

³⁹ F Fanon (n3) 184n39.

denigrating views-and-viewpoints inscribed in the apparently universal white-card imaginary surfaces of psycho-social, aesthetic, econo-political, media and legal standards.

Sure, there may be a therapeutic aspect to this apathy-to-empathy confession and conversion-process. For instance, there may be artists and aesthetically attuned mediators, but also NGOs working in security or disaster management field projects, magistrates in transitional justice tribunals, corporate media and their “good people” spectators who feel interpellated to research within themselves, with apathetic audiences, and evil perpetrators, the ideas, values and mental attitudes on the basis of which their acts of omission or re-action were decided and carried out. Further, to confess their crimes and proclaim their guilt. Furthermore, to be redeemed and reintegrated into good, temperate, centred and civilised society.

The practices of so-called transitional justice, today’s art-as-therapy and humanitarian interventionism clash on this point with the decolonizing critique of medical jurisprudence. Let’s quote Fanon here, at length:

The lived experience of the act, its justifications, the conflict that this act attempts to go beyond -otherwise said the facts as seen by the accused – are always of the utmost importance. The expert therefore has to try to discover the truth of the act that will be the foundation of the truth of its author. Since, for the perpetrator, to deny his act, to dismiss it, can be lived by him as a fundamental alienation of his being. To lay claim to his act, on the contrary, to assume it in full (like Hugo, one of Sartre’s protagonists, who said that only his act remains to him) is to escape from the absurd and to give his life a meaning.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ F Fanon (n3) 413-416.

But, as Fanon found out, “these attitudes postulate a reciprocal and prior recognition of the group by the individual and of the individual by the group ...” a dialectical foundation within the group that enables the crystallization of collective values. And as he says, it is only on the basis of such values that the definition of crime or deviation first become possible. The problem is that “all this once again presupposes the group’s homogeneity”, which makes moral pluralism, political imaginings and designs for the pluriverse, unthinkable. The point of this criticism is not “to founder in the poetry of ‘the law of the jungle’ so dear to novelists’, nor to repeat the robinsonades of yesterday in the institutional philosophy and art criticism of today. Rather, it’s to recognise that the “true law” in these circumstances always obtains. Which law? To quote Fanon, once more: “It is not an attempt to establish a better society alongside of another adjudged inadequate. It is an attempt to sustain the reign of terror by recreating the unipolar group”.

In short, assertive mono-culturalism.

The argument is that confession has a moral pole that we tend to refer to as sincerity. But it also has an civic pole “that is dear to Hobbes and [other] philosophers of the social contract”. I may confess as a man or a woman and I am sincere. “I confess as a citizen” or, to be more precise, as a conscript-citizen in accordance with the warrior nationalisms of the day “and I validate the social contract”. This perversion of freedom, a pathology of liberty, is what passes for the essence of community and authentic society nowadays, in the wake of the globalisation of the late settler colonial condition. In such condition, an attempt to sustain the reign of terror by recreating the assertive mono-culturalism of the twentieth century in the twenty-first, the bodies in trans-motion that Sánchez’s art criticism and Murillo’s art practice of travel make present, together with the truth they

incarnate, remain covered over or simulated. “We gravitate around a system that, ontologically, escapes us”, Fanon says.⁴¹

5. Conclusion: Against Perspective.

Fanon referred in such manner to a system of representation, the aesthetic and political system we described before as ocular-centrism and naturalist-(mono)culturalism, or the linear perspective that informed both the ethical institutional attitude and the technical architecture of fortitude/fortress characteristic of imperial and settler colonial projects. Crucially, he uses the trope-figure of the void to do so, one which constantly appears in Fanon’s dramaturgy and one that we would associate nowadays with cosmological images of black holes and black matter.

The perspective of ocular-centrism functions like a black hole projecting the whole of spacetime into the one-eye of a master-organiser (for instance, the painter) standing outside of the scene he organises and of his system of counting. Nothing is supposed to escape the eye of the law-and-spectacle that from such a viewpoint imposes a particular yet supposedly unique, exceptional partition of the sensible. But when confronted by the “subterranean bodies” Sánchez speaks of, the same ones that populate Murillo’s artwork, the forces of gravity change direction and this perspective is thrown into disorienting confusion. Fanon’s work, Sánchez’s art criticism and Murillo’s artwork help us dissolve that confusion. The shift in the forces appears in Murillo’s work as the sense of this vector

⁴¹ F Fanon (n3) 416.

becomes a negative one, a vector of refusal that, ontologically, aesthetically, cosmologically, escapes the given system.⁴²

This is the perspective against which the violent art of Óscar Murillo makes sense. Ditto, it's also the framework that Frantz Fanon decisively questioned in his 1955 essay "Conducts of Confession in North Africa (2)". It has set the stage for the presuppositions of the social contract theory that is the basis of much modern law and political philosophy, from Hobbes to Carl Schmitt. A partition of the sensible, to speak aesthetically. Let's conclude that the intersection between Fanon's ethical-clinical discourse and Murillo's artistic practice, or Sánchez's art criticism of contemporary Colombian society, focuses precisely on the revelation that the social contract, based on the separation between nature and culture, is in fact a "Faustian contract". A global contract under the current dispensation of the planetary late colonial settler condition.⁴³

As Fanon says, this all presupposes that unicity inheres in the social and psychic self. Fanon's explosive dramaturgy and clinical critique of the law and social contract theory, Sánchez's art criticism of Colombian society, and the violent art of Óscar Murillo rest on the realisation of the impossibility of (recognition) relations in the colonial situation, which has now become global. Especially if and when such relations are reduced to a formal act of

⁴² See S Rivera (n1) 25, and Enrique Dussel, "Siete hipótesis para una estética de la liberación", in *Siete ensayos de la filosofía de la liberación* (Madrid: Trotta, 2020) 125n341, cited by Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, "On the Apophatic Urgency of Now: A Future for the Philosophy of Liberation" in *Decolonizing Ethics. The Critical Theory of Enrique Dussel*, ed. by A. Allen & E. Mendieta (University Park, Penn.: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021) 127-146, for other aesthetic decolonial critiques of so-called Cartesian ocular-centrism. Also, Ambrosio Velasco Gómez & Jose Luis Villacañas Berlanga, *Humanismo Republicano Iberoamericano. Un debate* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Nueva, 2019) for the wider debate on the meaning of ocular-centrism in political and legal philosophy between Europe and the Americas.

⁴³ F Fanon (n3) 414. Also, O Fals Borda (n4) 368.

address or the mere exchange of (inner signs of) language and culture assumed to be sufficient and exclusive of the turn to violence (displaced to the side of nature) in constituting a social order. This is not because their art and criticism founders in the poetry of “the law of the jungle” or the romanticising of relic identities. Nor it is because they judge the sado-masochistic structure of criminal milieus as devoid of normative attitude. It is because they observe in the settler colonial condition a law that always obtains, the law of the state. Namely, the attempt to sustain the reign of terror by recreating the system of assertive mono-culturalism.

The difference between Fanon’s dramaturgy or clinical critique and contemporary artists and art critics like Sánchez and Murillo, is that the colonial condition is now global rather than being particular to places like north Africa or Colombia. Their art and art criticism takes stock of the fact that the occasion for transcendental reflection and re-symbolization is the (always violent) confrontation with the searing violence of racism, mono-culturalism and plunder.

This also entails that neither race reductionism nor class reductionism would advance us in that confrontation. Of course, it is producers (as a class distinguishable from those who invest and otherwise engage in productive activities) who produce the things that become property that may be valued as capital, but property values are dependent on things that are non-material, so to speak ideological or superstructural, like confession in the moral-religious and contractual sense, cultural recognition, the exteriorisation and projection by society of power as nature, aesthetic visuality and forms of dividuality such as race.

That is why their art and criticism gains intensity (and a certain vocabulary) in the wake of the rebellions and the *insoumise* demonstrations of 2020 and 2021 in the Americas

and elsewhere. Terms like “racial capitalism”, “global settler colonialism”, “decolonise this place”, “subterranean” and “violent amnesia” have now become part of a global conversation. As signifiers and imaginings of class and racism in art and political circles. Also, as sites of intersection between artistic practices and ethical-political discourses as well as acts.

Speaking of Colombia, not as a particularly unique case but as a concrete universal, a country that tends to rush head on into and “seek refuge in amnesia”, a new generation of Colombian artists, critics and thinkers, led by people like Óscar Murillo, Elena Sánchez and Carlos Motta, are beginning to point out what is common and hugely problematic in the register of global culture. Precisely, the injunction to forget the past and turn the page on violence as if it were merely “polarising” or a thing of the past. The imposition of temperance and neutrality to peoples whose future has been foreclosed and no longer have anything to fear or anything to lose, but their chains, is in itself a case of the most violent amnesia.

Colombian-born, displaced and now London-based, Oscar Murillo puts the point in a far more direct way, like the cry of an animal or a punch in the face of a fascist: “People [there] have this existence of -you name it- corruption, racism, oppression. I’m not going to romanticise it at all. It [Colombia] is a terrible country”. Murillo is under no illusions that art will suffice to count or account for the absent bodies of the disappeared, the blinded, raped bodies and silenced voices. This is true. Especially, as he points out, when art opts for monumentality.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ó Murillo (n). See also Motta & Van Tomme (n1) 250.

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