

Writing IDENTITY with H of Hippo or notations on the idea of NATION in Latin America



Everything started in an airplane departing from Madrid with destination Buenos Aires, as I was reading the newspaper I saw a very strange Title: "Pepe is dead"; the small paragraph of 5 lines that accompanied the photo of a military battalion with a death gigantic animal at their feet, described the death of one of the hippopotamus of Pablo Escobar killed by the authority of the natural resources ministry of Colombia. As soon as I read the information it triggered several questions on my head. The only clear thought I had is that somehow Pablo Escobar, that died almost 20 years ago, manage to have these creatures in Colombia, and that them, by some decision were kept alive; for sure that they were many and that everybody but me, was completely inform of what was being said. But then the whole cadence of the news was of disapproval, for which I thought the animals where kept in a zoo or reservoir and after all these years escaped and were killed. What it came to my attention is that the usage of the language in the small article estimated that all the readers knew about the facts, as if Pepe was a meta-concept

attach to the culture. I kept thinking during the twelve hours in the air on the phrase: “Political survivors become the best historical witnesses”, I was not sure where I read it but it certainly became a premise for the research that was jet to begin¹.

After investigating obsessively on the facts of the hippos I decided to realize a work of art in the form of an archive that would show the eccentric story. I prepare myself during a year for the solo exhibition “Smuggling to Paradise”. My idea was to set up a semantic game in which different treatments on the way the story was told would arise information on identitiary positions in Latin-America. It was basically construct in five parts, each of them incisively thought in the context of a discursive exercise. More and more, and as usually happen inside the research, the pretentious idea is dramatically surpass by the creative approach of producing art and the strict exercise is transformed into a sensible translation.

Latin America viewed from abroad and the post-colonial statement

The story behind the exhibition is that in the 1980's, Pablo Escobar, the Colombian mafia capo, constructed a thematic park for his endeavors. 200 exotic animals where hidden in the place. After his assassination by the police, his animals were left behind to die. The hippos survived and after 17 years they are wandering free in the Magdalena River. Suddenly, in 2009, after being neglected for almost two decades, the animals became a motive of media alarm and with that an ecological problem that claim international attention.

At first glance, to show the position in the world, we have two pieces that combining geographical elements and text reflect physical observations of the problem. In one (Figure #1) is possible to see a map of Colombia where red flags signalize the places where the hippos had being seen. On the other

¹ Writing these pages reappeared this phrase in the Introduction of the Location of Culture by Homi Bhabha, very near to the idea of the “unhomely”. Certainly the text was in the back of my head, secretly working, during the entire development of my artwork.

(Figure #2) a site-specific signal is developed for those geographical points. Apparently very accurate the pieces have a scientific aesthetic- present in big part of the show- that gives little room for doubt, both pieces nevertheless play with the fact that all the places are no more than occurrence or encounters between the people of the region and the hippos, so to say, far away from the truth, are based on word of mouth research. The signals, more over, are there to show places where the hippos attacked, as if with it presence they will liberate the region of the animal plague. Both works show the problem seeing from above, from a systematic distance similar to that one on the statistical charts of international organisms that talk about problems in conflict zones.



Figure #1. Map of encounters.

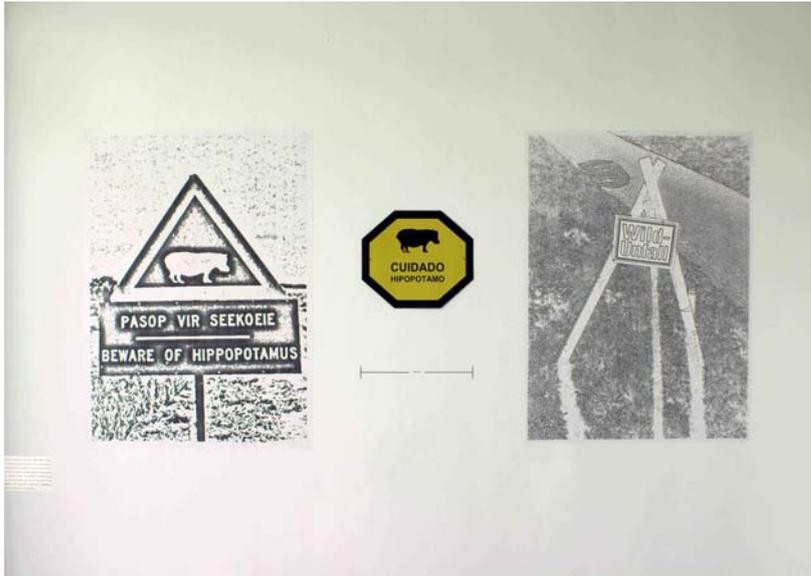


Figure #2. In the middle signal design to show the places of attack. On the left a signal

Around the showroom is also the always present position of the tv (Figure #3), a compilation of news that edited in a very malicious way, let appear in different languages, discourses that go from the far right that preaches that “all foreign creatures need to be eliminated” to the ecological parties pleading for a “sacred place for the divine creatures in the new paradise”.



Figure #3. Tv with videos of the news talking about the problem

Another omnipresent position is the one of the ex-colonizer, Spain, in the voice of some of the reporters observing with a clear pitch of exoticism what is happening in the former colonies as craziness. This voice is similar to the meta-structure signaled by the Title of the article “Pepe is dead” that can be

read on one hand as expression of the sight in which what happens on the other side of the ocean is part of the daily tale of Spain, and on the other, far from the conquer, as a fraternal empathy with the place. In any case, the work was not set up as a scream against the “mother land” as some times is referred, but on a possible reading of the thematic. American reporters, on the other hand, fill the place with drama and action, when all the news finishes with paraphrases of the sentence “ Maybe the striking death of the owner will repeat the story on the fatal destiny of the violent animals” and a circumspect BBC voice talks about the possible advantages of having hippos in the new-world paradise for the future of the specie, also present are the Colombian and other Latin-American journalists voices talking about the hippos as if they were a national armor or an identity example. In any case, deep inside the different voices in the videos is the idea that the colonizers where not one but many countries, and that the idiosyncrasy of a place, stained -in both positive and negative ways- by many exotic and internal mentalities. This gives us an idea of “contaminated” individual, that is also expression of every human, and that for us, show in post-colonial terms a modern men that is made by multiple fragments of different cultures. An individual made by all the migrational movements and information flows proper of a so globalized world. In the words of James Clifford “We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagoes... Perhaps there is no return for anyone to a native land, only field notes for its reinvention”². This omnipresent sound with many voices gives the viewer the perspective of a receptacle of different positions, makes the visitor an example of post-colonial being, putting us in the center of all the voices.

The German contribution to historical perception

In general the history of our countries and the colonization gives importance just to the Spanish influence, since it was, the one of formal impact, but the tale of a post-colony does not start and refers just to colony but to all the migratory movements that existed in the country before and after this period.

² J.Clifford.The predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002

One not well-documented influence is the German Tale. Even if apparently Germany had no colonies in the new world, the strong commercial relations, scientific trips and intellectual influences that existed in-between Germany and our countries since 1528 has left a big imprint in the culture.

To the contemporary consultant of **WIKIPEDIA**, the answer to the search on early German colonies gives a curious result; the first appearance is the concession of land given to the Welser family. In 1525 Charles V introduces the possibility of exploiting the unexplored territories of new Indies by non-Spanish colonists. On March 28th 1528, just 36 years after the discovery, the Welser family obtained exclusivity to conquer and colonizes the territory of the Province of Venezuela and with it a big part of the New Indies.

Finding “El dorado” was one of the principal goals of the Welser family, but the different attempts to find it were never successful and after some years the defeated “Council of Indias” decided to revoke the concession, not only because of the failure finding the Dorado, but because the Welser needed to found a big number of cities and disseminate the catholic faith among the indigenes, target that was never accomplish.

Nevertheless German interests are still present in Latin America till present times. At the beginning the relation was just commercial, but after 1800 the continent was also a place of research for a big number a naturalists and other Scientifics that started to have interest and develop theories in South America, starting with the investigations of Humboldt in 1799 that managed to describe with accuracy the nature of these latitudes. Many scientists followed him and their influences are clear in Anthropology, Biology, Engineering, Sociology and other studies around our territories. Still on these days, the “German Expert” is a figure of big weight for our cultures.

In some of my previous work, as in “The German Tale” and “Tapirus terrestris” (See Appendix) I try to demonstrate conceptually that the German point of view have a strong influence in our cultural development that there is a significant German contribution that frames in some respect Latin American thought. The wholes, nevertheless, left by all traditional attempt to formulate our history have contributed to a flexible construct that in the words of Andres

Bello³ had to do with the fictional nature of our idea of time and our lack of systematic documentation of history, so to say, in Latin America the exercise of completing the wholes requires a fictional act and more precise the possibility of the real-magic. This more than a problem is a wonderful characteristic of the Latin-American storytelling.

For “Smuggling to Paradise” I work as devil advocate, showing inconsistencies across the story. With a critical point of view, the narration shows a slanted influence where the “expert” seen to have dubious intentions. A collection of intervened images (Figure #4) make a parody of the German appearance around the hippos of Escobar. The idea is to disestablish the notion of expertise, giving an extra grade of freedom in the reading of the work. It is not a critic against German influence, but around the wide spread perception in our cultures that all what comes from abroad is a better idea or solution. For me, there is no pure influence that can solve cultural problems or comment on history, and the sense of a better or superior Culture is very dangerous and démodé. To generate a discourse from the margin it is necessary to eliminate false misconceptions and open the spectra, avoiding of cultural judgment. Just the mixture can produce a valid narration, and a site of multiple experiences is the only possible place for the actual writing.



Pablo Escobar se daba en hacer de su zoológico particular un refugio ecológico de grandes magnitudes. Para eso se asesoró con diversos especialistas y hasta organizó un congreso donde la anadora de orden era Petra Kelly, entonces fundadora del partido verde alemán. La misma suspendió el viaje cuando se enteró que el hándicap colombiano era narcotraficante.



Pope fue sacrificado por el presidente y el gerente general de la empresa Autabilla, Federico y Christian Pfoel Schneider, respectivamente, que representan la marca alemana Porsche en Colombia y forman parte de la Federación Colombiana de Tiro y Caza deportiva (Fedeltiro). El equipo de caza contó con la presencia de los empresarios, su asistente, un fotógrafo, los representantes de tres instituciones ambientales locales y un batallón del Ejército colombiano.



La segunda finalista del Miss World 1991 donde se coronó reina la venezolana Noribeth Lant, Diana Tildon-Ovies, Miss África del Sur, fue atacada en 2003 por un hipopótamo cuando pedaleaba en su canoa en el Delta de Okavango, el animal le destruyó la góndola. La modelo heredó su belleza por línea materna, ya su abuelo había ganado premios internacionales por su cautivadora similitud con Marlene Dietrich.

³ “When a country’s history doesn’t exist, except in incomplete, scattered documents in vague traditions that must be compiled and judged, the narrative method is obligatory” from Cultural Autonomy of America in Intellectual Conscience of America. New York: Eliseo Torre, 1966

Figure #4. Pictures and text showing inconsistencies and curiosities of the story of the Hippos of Escobar.

The different pictures showed for example Petra Kelly, one of the founders of the Green Party in Germany that was invited by Pablo Escobar give the inaugural speech during the opening of his paradisiacal thematic park or the moment of the killing of Pepe, were the brothers Schneider, representatives of Porsche Colombia are in charge of the platoon that shoots the animal. Some other pictures gave small tips or details of the story, things that happened in the Naples Ranch and/ or information about the hippo's etiology. For example, the incredible anecdote that when the animals arrived to Colombia imported from Africa, the police was waiting for the plane and intercepted it. After the animals were taken into custody, Escobar paid to have them back, replacing them for autochthonous creatures, so to say he exchanges zebras for donkeys and even had the time to paint them in black and white.

Delirious language as resistance

It is interesting to remark that the absurdity of the reality that prevails in our countries where everything can happen leaves an enormous room for the narrative possibility. Reality surpasses fiction in such an extreme way that the historical facts are indistinguishable from complete fantasy. Literature or the fictional form of narration has then the capability of changing other historical facts. Indeed the identity of our countries is firmly attached to the fictional novel helping in the construction and reification of sense. The discourse in Latin America can be catalogued as one of active transformation of time. "All this assumes that literature has the capacity to intervene in history to help construct it. Generations of Latin American writers and readers assumed as much; and they have produced and consumed foundational novels as part of the more general process of nation-building...Empty spaces were part of America's demographic and discursive nature"⁴. The narrative condition is not only present in literature, but in any discursive attempt to formulate history, in the works of many contemporary Latin-American artists the interventions evolve in new ways of understanding the facts, some pieces, create by their

⁴ D. Sommer. Irresistible romance in Nation and Narration. New York: Routledge, 2006

articulation passages of history. That is the case for example of Nadín Ospina, in his work; some icons of the western culture are treated in material and display as pre-Hispanic pieces, some of them can even pass a test of carbon 14 for antiquity (Figure #8 and #9). The way of allocation and the simultaneity of past and the present in the same sculpture transform the perception not only of time, but also of the rigor of the anthropological research. The pieces criticize with their presence the whole system of classification and display of the exotic in the museum context.



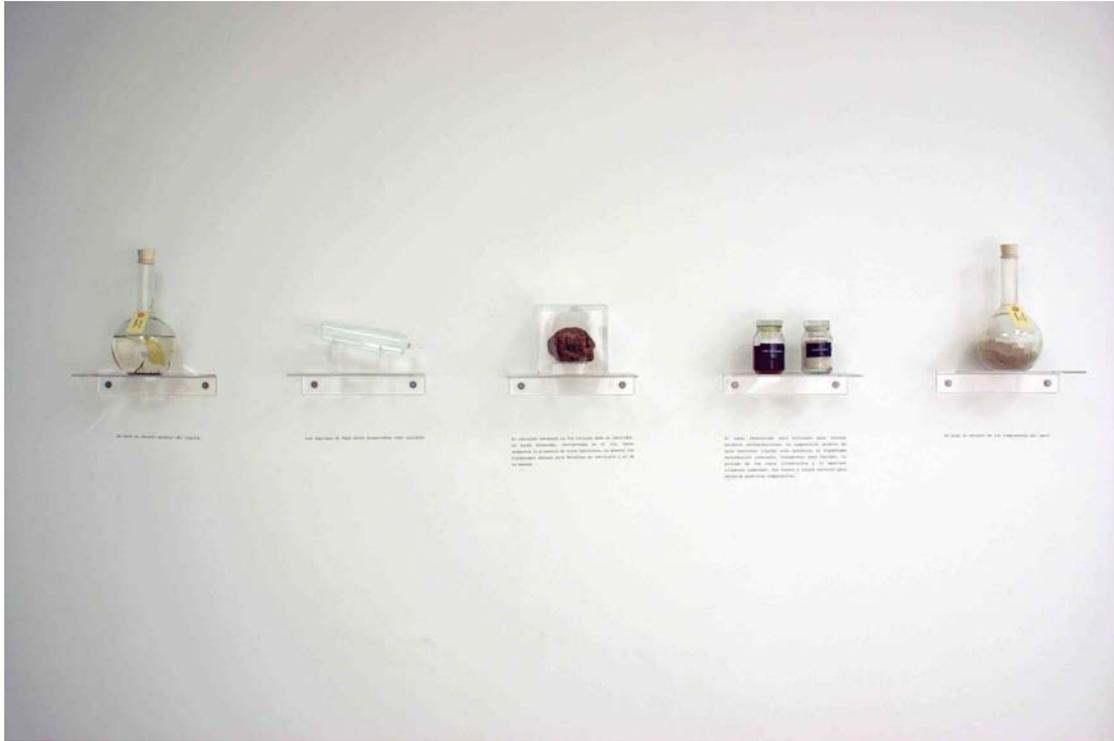
Figure #7. Chiefs.2006



Figure #8. Guardian 1999.

In an attempt to articulate a comment on this topic is possible to see the installation “in-situ” (Figure #9) as part of smuggling to paradise, where a scientific display show different specimens recollected in the deathbed of Pepe. Once again the laboratory aesthetic gives the impression of solemn

truth. The work transform the disgusting killing of the animal into an ephemeral, light almost poetic, situation.



Figure#9. Specimens recollected in the deathbed of Pepe.

In between the pieces, the collection of tears of Pepe (Figure #10) in a glass container, appears as double activator of sense, on one hand constitute a desperate action to prevent more killings and on the other, gives the sensation of costly object, of relic of jewel part of a collection. The assimilation of the fantastic in this piece intends to be an act of narrative sorcery.

I wonder if the constant usage of the magical as narrative tool is an act of resistance against the hegemony of sense imposed by the europocentric vector of history. By incorporating absurdity and craziness in the discourse our countries revealed against the constructed sense of time giving space to the small and intimate story. By pretending to be absurd some of our cultural heritage has been preserved, after all delirium can be a form of resistance.⁵

⁵ “delirium is a form of resistance to mental deprivation...We know that delirium can be a survival technique” E. Glissant in: Le discours Antillais.Paris:Editions du Seuil,1981



Figure#10. Tears of Pepe.

In-between notions of Nation

The discursive dementia shall not be taken for superficiality. The absurd distribution of facts is a methodology of discontentment and gives Latin American nations freedom of speech. But all the stories are not told within the same parameters, the characteristics are similar, but each nation has a particular usage of the elements. Some times is necessary to open a bridge of sense in between neighbor countries. The hidden sides are normally very different across the continent.

In terms of our example, the Colombian hippos are creatures brought from a distant Africa, they represent the adaptation to the new environment since they reproduced successfully in paradise, but at the same time they will always be metaphorically foreigners with many enemies. Somehow in this context these animals are a good expression of the "unhomely", they represent on one side "fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference"⁶ and on the other "traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence"⁷; They are

⁶ H.Bhabha. The location of culture. New York: Routledge, 1994. P.13

⁷ idem. P.15

simultaneously the hidden personal story of Colombia, the time that has passed without being perceived, the silent witnesses of a post-drug architectural era and part of a history that is full of absurd facts.

Through the usage of a playful script the wall of the “hippo bag” (figure # 11) represents tensions in the political discourse between neighboring countries. For Venezuela, place of the exhibition, the bag with rests of hippo is an allegory of the incontrollable frontier, of the unmentionable quantity of dead bodies that are covering the soil. For Colombia, on the contrary, the bags are expressions of the internal dynamics and measure of power of the different forces in conflict. Both vision are grotesque evidence of violence, the perception around the problem, is nevertheless completely different. But they have the potentiality of coexistence; they are at the same time reality. The presence of the Hippos in the forest is to both countries a case of hybrid hyphenation; the bag perception exists in an in-between space.



Figure #11. The population of hippos of Escobar summarizes around 45 specimens; it would be necessary to have 63 hippo bags to carry their remains out of the Magdalena River.

But the hippos are not creatures of the Colombia forest and from the discomfort of not belonging they are metaphors of exoticism, their strangeness

has become jet familiar with time. They represent the guest that has become part of the house having the license of being comfortable, but keeping its otherness. And from this distance they are finally the best witnesses of the political history and the best source of narrative force. It is not by chance that the video ends up with a man that expressing his opinion almost in tears says: "The hippos are not any more African, these hippos were born here, they are Colombian Hippos and I am very proud of having them in Antioquia, they are *Antioqueños* as me, I love them". The exotic has thus become part of the identity and this is the first step for the cultural hybridity to exist. The exotic has then two places, the one inside and simultaneously the one outside.

Observing the world from other perspective

And is from the assumption of assimilation, but also of foreignness, that the world map changes its shape. The time is not anymore a linear vector but a spatial construction with simultaneous lines, but both structures present and past, coexist and appears a third space. The history of the minority sounds with equal weight and becomes part of the structure of the metropolis maintaining its difference. The hippo is then a citizen of the minority, and with it, an expression of the assimilated migrant that lives in the ambivalence of being native and survives as a migrant. And is that this hippo belongs to the space of the in-between, it is exactly that benjaminian 'element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation'. The Colombian hippo does not evoke the original but shows the wrinkles of time. Putting the exhibition on perspective the whole installation works in the impossibility of translation and it is set up on the interstitial space. The roll of the work of contemporary art is precisely to activate this movement of meaning, the function of the work, as detonator of sense is to always be against but remaining a part of the cultural authority. By its position against cultural supremacy evident in the simultaneous voices of the video omnipresent in the work and the multiple approaches to narrating the facts explored in each of the pieces of the installation "Smuggling to Paradise" is an attempt of cultural translation. The final piece (Figure # 12) is a wall where simultaneous stories of hippos coexist, where the Colombian hippos or the hippos of Escobar are part of the universal tale but they also remain as secret element of the untranslatable.

That is the reason why the images are numbered but they don't belong to any list. They are simultaneously out there but impossible to classified.



Figure #12. Wall of hippos

The title of this paper comes from the article of the same name published in "El Nacional" after a long and fruitful conversation with Marjorie Delgado Aguirre, far away for coming into conclusion the discussion left many open questions and an interesting debate on post-colonial discourse.