

SOA CYCLE
(www.carlosmotta.com/soa.html)
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Lesson Plan: un-Learn
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Confronted with withering public opinion in response to ineffectual policymaking, the US government changed the title of its War on Terror in 2005 to the Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism. A similar device of rhetorical clouding seemed at play in 2001 when the US Department of Defense, under significant political pressure stemming from massive popular demonstrations, announced that the controversial School of Americas (SOA) would close and the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) would open in its stead. This "new" program has marched ahead with the same contested military training programs that "instruct rising civilian, military, and law enforcement leaders from throughout the Western Hemisphere."

Colombian-born and New York-based artist Carlos Motta has made the SOA and its reincarnate WHINSEC the focus of much of his recent work. By manipulating the versions of records and history propagated by the school, Motta's ongoing SOA cycle urges viewers to approach all presentations of "official" information as constructed. With major questions continuing to assail the US government's suspected use of torture at prisons in Iraq, Cuba, and in secret overseas locations, Motta's manipulations of records and histories propagated by the SOA urges viewers to approach "official" information with requisite skepticism.

It is 3 pm on Saturday, November 17, 2006. I am sitting on a bench in the Plaza de Armas, the center of Santiago, Chile. The echoes of a collective voice—that of the demonstrators who convened during annual protests this November to demand immediate closing of the infamous School of the Americas (SOA)—reverberate throughout the square. This event was part of a series of yearly marches organized by numerous activist organizations in cities in the southern US (the SOA headquarters is located at Fort Benning in Columbus, GA) and across Latin America. Each demonstration unites thousands of civilians to express our discontent with the official instruction of torture and widespread US militarism in Latin America.

Founded in 1946 in Panama and relocated to Fort Benning in 1984, the US government-sponsored SOA has trained more than 61,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency tactics, military strategy, and torture techniques. The SOA has become an instrumental institution in the promotion and protection of the US government's military, political, and economic interests in Latin America. The school's pedagogical mission has been subject to severe criticism following accusations of human rights violations by a score of prominent graduates; notorious offenders include Bolivian Hugo Banzer, Peruvian Vladimiro Montesinos, El Salvadorian Roberto D'Aubuisson, and Panamanian Manuel Antonio Noriega, dictators who have killed and tortured their own people in the name of political or economic interests.

While researching the history of the SOA I became particularly interested in the fact that the US Department of Defense closed the school in December of 2000 and reopened it under the name Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation

in January of 2001 because, among other reasons, "concerned citizens desired change." This seemingly represented a significant policy shift on the part of the US to confront the innumerable indictments plaguing the school. And yet, it ultimately revealed itself as little more than a rhetorical strategy; the school's tactics and policies have remained exactly the same.

SOA: Black and White Tales is my cycle of installations investigating the SOA's central role in the US' military and political operations in Latin America. I began the project after reading the speeches delivered at the SOA's closing ceremony in 2000 that carefully articulated the historical "need" for the military training of "our neighbors" in a "genuine" pedagogical structure that would stop the "Marxist cancer" from spreading in "our continent." I was haunted by the speaker's ideological conviction that communism, narco-trafficking, and terrorism justified the need for the instruction of warfare techniques. In this authoritative official language, the contrast between the US government's view of itself and the school in comparison to their great enemies of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras couldn't have been more black and white.

To address the SOA's teaching of military tactics, I chose the methodology of art, using a variety of means: chalk drawings, audio reenactments, photographic appropriation and manipulation, and research-based publications. SOA: Black and White Tales, for instance, mimics the classroom in an attempt to dig into the process of instruction, which—in the case of the SOA—is tied to the malleable meaning of words and language, as well as the assigning of emotions to specific ideological acts.

The SOA cycle set out to critically engage with official and public information available on the SOA's website; its mission statement, course descriptions, and "Command in Brief." This is particularly the case in SOA: Black and White Text, a 40 foot-long strip of chalkboard painted directly on the gallery's wall onto which I literally juxtapose/collapse the official information from the SOA website in white chalk with language of protest and dissent used by activist organizations such as the SOA Watch in yellow chalk. The two layers of information expose the paradigmatic use of the word democracy. For example, one paragraph that describes the "Promoting of Democracy" as a "synergistic objective" is intervened by the empty outline of the figure of a priest/protester holding a sign that reads "STOP THE KILLING." The self-conscious manipulation/appropriation of "real" information provided me with a particular way to expose the two distinctly opposite ideological trends fueling the political discourse surrounding the SOA.

This body of work is also concerned with the construction of subjectivity in relation to language. SOA: Black and White Speech is an hour-long re-enactment of delivered speeches. All the pronouns in the text, however, have been changed from first to third person, respectively. Whereas he once blamed, he is now himself blamed, and vice versa. Furthermore, the recording's pitch has been manipulated, dramatically abstracting the speaker's voice producing a (symbolic) sonic disruption.

I am interested in the way that either the abstraction or literalizing of these materials functions as a retelling of socially inscribed meanings, a reconfiguration of contested historical events whose origin may be attributed to specialized conceptual and physical training. Let me recall Amnesty International's remark: "Torturers are not born that way: someone educates them, trains them and supports them. To end torture implies not only to abolish the commerce of materials destined to that end, but also of the commerce that contributes to create 'professional torturers'..."

Historically, Latin America has been defined by its relationship to the US. American interventions in the region date back to the 19th century and have generally installed a climate of political and economic subordination. By choosing the controversial SOA as a subject of my project I intended to highlight this recent history as influential in the formation constitutive of Latin American geographic identity over the past 60 years. To this end I produced a publication titled A Brief History of US Interventions in Latin America Since 1946 that provides a decisive historical context to each of the works in this cycle of installations by describing particular interventions that shaped the history of the continent.

SOA: Black and White Tales is a project that tells stories of violence and aggression. Analyzing these struggles in a visual form has been a challenging way for me to employ tactics of manipulation as a means of resistance. Creating alternative spaces that can serve as sites of opposition, reflection, and, hopefully, political change is necessary if not essential in present times. As Bertolt Brecht once expressed: "...Don't accept the habitual as a natural thing. In times of disorder, of organized confusion, of de-humanized humanity, nothing should seem natural. Nothing should seem impossible to change."

Carlos Motta is a New York-based Colombian artist. He is a graduate of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and holds an MFA from Bard College and a BFA from The School of Visual Arts, all in New York. His work has been widely exhibited in the US and abroad in solo and group exhibitions at venues such as Real Art Ways, Hartford; Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami; Winkelman/Schroeder Romero Gallery, New York; and Artists Space, New York.

For more information on Carlos Motta and the SOA, visit:

www.carlosmotta.com/soa.html

www.realartways.org/press/releases/2006/2006_03_20_carlosMotta.html

www.benning.army.mil/whinsec/about.asp?id=33

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