

SOMEWHERE THERE IS HISTORY: A CONVERSATION WITH CARLOS MOTTA

It was difficult to pin down what I would ask Carlos Motta about his work. It is not that what he has created is so far-fetched or incomprehensible, but rather that there is just so much of it, and it is so seemingly diverse in its scope and content. To focus on *Leningrad Trilogy* (2006), a series of videos that explore the history of public space in the city of Saint Petersburg, would mean ignoring projects like *SOA Cycle* (2005–07) and *Brief History* (2005–09), both of which detail America's military response to communism in Latin America. There is also his engagement with political unrest and protest in Colombia (*Where Do I Stand? Left, Right Or The Human Kind?*, 2008), Chile (*Memory of a Protest*, 2007), Brazil (*September*, 2005), and Honduras (with Josué Euceda, *Resistance and Repression*, 2007). And his recent project, *We Who Feel Differently* (2011), is a “database documentary” addressing issues faced by queer communities across the globe.

Despite Motta's interest in recording and “rewriting history,” one should not be deceived into believing he reveals any “objective truth.” To the contrary, he unabashedly admits to inserting his own “subjective perspective.” I wanted to know more about the topics he covers, the people he interviews, and the history he constructs and reconstructs. We first met in May 2013 in New York City, and several weeks later continued our conversation via Skype.

HARRY J WEIL: How do you define your artistic practice?

CARLOS MOTTA: For some time I thought about how I define my work and art practice, but I've stopped trying. I don't find categories all that useful, other than perhaps for building a market. Some of my projects are conceptual and discursive while others are aesthetic and visual. I care about making sure that the work communicates well within the different contexts in which it is presented. There are some projects that function well in museums or in gallery spaces, while others work better in documentary film circles or in more academic settings. Thematically, however, most of my projects are concerned with the ways in which history is constructed and documented. I am interested in subverting dominant narratives that often produce forms of exclusion.

HW: When did you first become interested in a documentary approach?

CM: In 2005 I began a four-year project titled *La buena vida / The Good Life* that distinctly shaped the way I think about making work. That project brought together my interest in asking political questions, in the politics of representation, and in finding formal strategies to develop artworks with political content. The impulse behind *La buena vida / The Good Life* and some of my other projects may seem “documentary,” but I am really interested in questioning the conventions of that form through methodological and formal experimentation.



The core material in *La buena vida / The Good Life* is an online video archive of hundreds of interviews with pedestrians on the streets of twelve capital Latin American cities about their perception of democracy as a form of government and about the role of US foreign policy in shaping the political conditions of that region. I set out to find out how historical events are remembered and historicized and how that knowledge influences the experience of present-day events.

HW: I want to focus on your more recent projects. You are in the midst of producing *Gender Talents*, which is about current events, specifically in the trans and intersex communities. I am curious to know how you use your documentary approach here.

CM: *Gender Talents* is a project-in-progress that focuses on the politics of gender self-determination. It features a series of videos documenting some of the work of organizations that independent trans (transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, travesti, cross-dressers, no gender, and gender-queer people) and intersex activists are developing in several cities throughout the world.

Trans and intersex movements have started to shape forcefully by forming specific discourses that identify, reflect on, and address the social and political needs of their communities. It is a nascent politic that demands the transformation of a legal system that fundamentally denies gender non-conforming people, that looks to influence the ways they are represented, and that demands a more suitable and respectable space in the world.

So far, for *Gender Talents*, I have conducted in-depth interviews and documented activities in Cali, Colombia; several cities in India; and San Francisco and Los Angeles. I will be traveling to Cape Town, Buenos Aires, and Melbourne in the next year.

HW: What will be its final form?

Above

Still from *Gender Talents* (2013–present) by Carlos Motta; courtesy the artist



HW: Describe your documentary approach with Santamaria.

CM: I have done in-depth interviews with the founders, members, and workers of the various organizations. I have accompanied particular activists to the “field”; for example, Valentina Riascos from Santamaria Fundación took us to hand out condoms and lubricant throughout public prostitution sites in Cali, where we had a chance to record her interactions with the “girls” as she spoke to them about the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and generally checked in on their well being.

Similarly, Amitava Sarkar, a fierce activist working in Calcutta at Solidarity and Action Against HIV Infection in India, invited us to

document a few of the workshops she leads with transgender destitute youth in Orissa; in which they use theater, dance, and other creative strategies to learn how to read and write, as well as to face pressing questions about how to confront the challenges of being trans in a country like India. Trans issues may be gender issues, but they often intersect with other urgent social problems such as discrimination, poverty, incarceration, etc. Trans issues cannot be addressed without talking about access to healthcare or racism, for example, and these organizations understand and communicate this quite well.

HW: It’s a strange question to ask, but who is the audience for *Gender Talents*? Those involved in the trans community and activism? Or those who don’t know anything about trans issues?

CM: I have chosen not to work exclusively for one audience. However, I think I make these projects primarily for the people I interview; I trust that the work may be useful for them to further their work. But I make the work from my own subjective perspective of the problems at stake. I am interested in producing projects that can expose these difficult questions critically and provide a context to understand the nuances of the issues. The choices I have made in terms of the use of media, for instance, come from thinking about the different ways that the information I have gathered could best be communicated, and thinking about the different contexts in which I show my work, from museums and galleries to community centers.

We Who Feel Differently is a good example of the kind of multi-platform project I am speaking about. It is primarily an online website/archive (wewhofeeldifferently.info), which was widely distributed through a variety of social and institutional networks and has been visited by thousands of people all around the world. Its installation version at the New Museum in the summer of 2012 had a very different kind of audience: a queer public who wanted to be there to view the installation and attend the many programs that were offered, alongside regular museum visitors—including tourists—for whom the museum itself is a destination.

CM: I don’t know what the final form of the project will be; I am shooting it so that I could make a series of shorts films; but I will allow the material to dictate its form as it progresses. I am sure, however, that it will take the form of an online archive and a book.

HW: Can you speak a bit about the subjects of the work?

CM: In Cali, I worked closely with Santamaria Fundación, a group of trans activists who work to influence the dire social conditions of trans sex workers in the city. This organization has developed a unique strategy to reach out and empower sex workers by educating them on a variety of subjects that include safe sex, access to health and legal services, and how to defend themselves from physical and verbal abuse.

HW: How did you find out about this group?

CM: Santamaria Fundación has become a referent and leading organization in the region in the field of human rights from the perspective of gender identity rights and politics. I learned about their work as I was working on *We Who Feel Differently*, and in fact it was Santamaria Fundación that influenced me to start working on this project. They are a very inspiring group of activists who got tired of waiting for mainstream LGBT organizations (and their assimilationist agendas) or government institutions (for which trans sex workers don’t “exist”) to care about their concerns, and have organized to improve the quality of their lives. The majority of members at Santamaria Fundación approach their advocacy and community activism work from direct life experience. Most of them used to be sex workers themselves, which gives them unrestricted access to other workers on the streets. They are doing what they’re doing because they know what their peers and friends need.

Above

Installation view of *Museum as Hub*: Carlos Motta: *We Who Feel Differently* at the New Museum, New York (2012); photograph by Naho Kubota

The conflation of those two audiences was interesting to witness. I enjoyed silently watching people engage in conversations in response to the videos.

Lastly, I think the question of audience is intimately tied to a question of form. Different formal strategies speak in different ways. Being mindful of that fact can clarify expectations and identify specific audiences.

HW: And when your work enters into a museum, do you think the social or political message is lost?

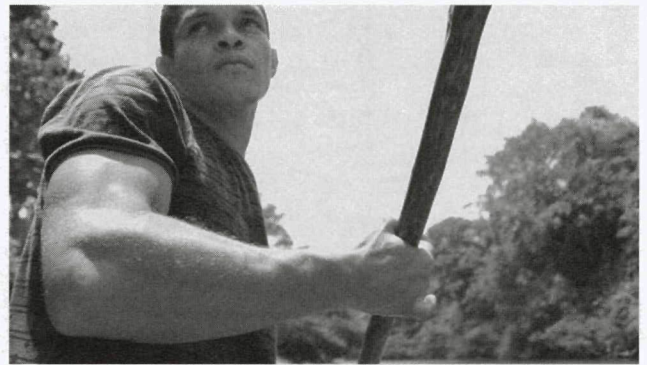
CM: There are two things your question makes me think of that I would like to contest. First, there is the assumption that the museum (and aesthetics) is antithetical to political content. This assumption underestimates the agency and the conceptual and formal resolution of the work itself, and it also underestimates the audience and the work they do as they engage an artwork. Audiences aren't passive; the audience *produces* the work critically, analytically, and emotionally as it encounters it.

The museum as an institution, particularly in the US with its funding structure based on donations from rich donors and private foundations, presents ethical and political challenges—yet for the most part museums represent “public” spaces; they are not monolithic entities for the wealthy. Audiences are wide and varied. What is important is that artists continue to confront questions and issues and engage audiences with them.

Second, there is a common belief that art is a universal language. That anyone encountering any work of art should be able to understand it, and that an artwork in a museum should democratically speak to everyone *equally*. If you think about it, no one demands that from most professional disciplines. Who goes to a courtroom and expects to understand the technicalities of the law? Who would expect to enter an operating room and understand the complexities of medical practice? Art, like the law and medicine, is a specialized field. Artists and other cultural producers train to become artists and make specific choices in terms of form, medium, etc., in order to communicate to a specific constituency. Remember Walter Benjamin's wonderful sentence in “The Author as Producer” (1934): “An author who teaches a writer nothing, teaches nobody anything.” The politics of a work lie in its capacity to challenge its form from within, and that is a highly specialized trait. In that sense (good) artworks are always political, and the museum context can never strip that away.

HW: Regarding context, your project *Shape of Freedom* (2013) takes place at the former home of the well-known Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. How do you work with space here, particularly a space already associated with an important figure in the history of art? You had billed the project as focused on “emblems of sexual difference.”

CM: The Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros is a contemporary art museum located in the home of the muralist, one of Mexico's



best-known artists. The museum also hosts Siqueiros's archive and has some of his murals on permanent display. It is located in Polanco, one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods. When I was invited to do an intervention on the façade of the museum, I figured it would be interesting to propose a project that dealt with the politics of sexual difference—a subject not only ignored, but condemned, by Siqueiros and his contemporaries. Homosexuality, for most communists, was an “illness of capitalism,” and if capitalism were defeated, homosexuality would also be defeated.

Formally, the project is quite simple. I marked the building with a large-scale pink triangle, which at first glance appears as a purely formal gesture. On the windows of the building there is a vinyl print representing Xochipilli, the Aztec god of beauty and flowers, whose image has also been appropriated to represent male prostitutes and homosexuals. The two are semantic emblems of sexuality. The mural is also accompanied by a timeline (produced in collaboration with Mexican scholar Susana Vargas), which recounts the history of the pink triangle and other emblems of sexual and gender movements. The history brings together international and Mexican events, narrating a history of queer social struggles.

HW: Your work comes full circle here. Despite venue, you are mining your subjects to focus on conversations of identity, whether concerning gender and sexuality, or political and social inequities.

CM: I am most interested in history, how it is constructed, and the role we play as citizens in that construction. All of my work attempts to defy hegemonic constructions and the influence they exert on how we live. I am interested in what happens when we resist those forces. There is a sense of empowerment when you form your own venues and create your own institutions or when you construct your own narratives.

HW: Where are you in these works? So much of it is about documenting other people.

Above

Still from *Nefandus* (2013) by Carlos Motta; courtesy Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon, and Y Gallery, New York



The video is set in Don Diego river in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia and uses the river as a character—one that has both witnessed and erased the violence that took place there and that washed away traces of lives and communities interrupted by violence. With this video (as well as with the larger research I have been doing to develop a body of work on the subject) I have also been interested in questioning the methodological approaches of the social sciences, which are undoubtedly complicit with the project of colonization. How have anthropology and archeology, for example, reinforced ideas of the body and sex? Why do they often deny speaking about pleasure or desire in favor of ideas of the fertility of the earth, for example? The incredible

CM: I am always there. My voice is in every video, as I am the one asking the questions. Sometimes you even see me. I guide all the conversations in my pieces. I am also very conscious of my notions of subjectivity—the projects have no intention of presenting an objective documentation. I want to put forth a particular context for the audience to discuss. In that way, I am always in the work. I am the maker; I can't help but be so involved.

HW: And you are one of the voices narrating your new video *Nefandus* (2013), which revolves around pre-Hispanic relationships to sexuality and, specifically, the divide between those of the indigenous inhabitants and those of the Spanish conquistadors.

CM: *Nefandus* speaks about the way in which the Spanish and Portuguese conquest imported moral (and other epistemological) categories to the Americas. It speculates about the ways in which certain pre-Hispanic indigenous groups may have had a completely different understanding of sexuality and the body. The video references findings such as pottery, jewelry, and sculptures depicting graphic sexual scenes between men. *Nefandus* wants to reveal the colonizers' morality as an imposition and a fiction, and imagine how things might have been had indigenous groups not been exterminated on the basis of their sexual practices and had their traditions not been seen as immoral "behaviors" or sins. The video brings the viewer back to the moment of colonization, to think about the violation of a land and its people, where European ideas of identity were forcefully deposited.

and graphic homoerotic artifacts found throughout the Americas represent bodies free of dogma, yet the social sciences insist in reading them through that lens.

HW: In the video, there is a beautiful scene where you place a reproduction of Theodor de Bry's print *Sodomites Savaged by Mastiffs* (1594–96), which shows a group of hermaphrodites in Panama being eaten and killed by dogs, into the river. The camera fixates on it for a while as it floats away out of sight. Your voice comes in to explain that the water has recorded the trauma of colonization.

CM: I chose *Sodomites Savaged by Mastiffs* to be the only "graphic" image featured in *Nefandus* because it was produced by de Bry as he was "embedded" with the army, thoughtfully and objectively documenting their violent actions. It is a fairly well-known image that is often reproduced and exhibited but hardly ever put into context. "Drowning" the image to me was a way of connecting the landscape to its representation and of symbolically committing revenge, so to speak. Water has often appeared in my videos. Not only is water very photogenic, it has been a good element to use as a metaphor for the erasure and arbitrariness of historical knowledge. Water never comes back to the same place, it is never fixed.

HW: Water comes up again in the exhibition for *Nefandus* at Galeria Filomena Soares in Lisbon (June 1–September 14, 2013), where the video is presented alongside other sculptural works and prints, including three photographs from inside colonial forts (*Colonial Forts* # 10, 4, and 3). But from these dark interiors we can see vistas of the horizon over the sea, just out of arm's reach.

Above

Still from *Gender Talents* (2013–present) by Carlos Motta; courtesy the artist

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Still from *Gender Talents* (2013–present) by Carlos Motta; courtesy the artist

CM: These photographs were taken at Castillo San Felipe del Morro in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and present views of the horizon through windows of the fort. They are not just openings; they are openings to the ocean. Colonial forts were built generally as defense strongholds, but also as places to hold and distribute slaves and indigenous labor. The photographs, to me, function as symbols of that confinement, but also of the hope for freedom.

I think they need to be viewed within the context of the other work in the exhibition—the video and the various objects I have produced. Yes, the photographs are handsome, but if they were shown on their own, they would be read in strictly formal terms. For me, they become so much more; they are the architecture of my current project. They contain inside of themselves the symbol of these categories we confine ourselves to, and the openings are a way to transcend those confines.

HW: There is also a sculpture of an erect penis in the exhibition, which reminds me of the photographs you showed me in your studio of various pre-Hispanic sculptures of men and women engaging in very sexual acts, sometimes in groups of three. Why this interest in such erotic work?

CM: I find these objects intriguing and fascinating. They overtly speak of something that Western art has very consciously hidden: the celebration of the body, the genitals, and of sexual acts. These objects beg us to ask how and why we have consistently moralized sexuality? These artifacts are shameless, yet we project a Christian sense of shame and guilt on them.

HW: How do these photographs and objects, placed alongside the video for *Nefandus*, relate to your earlier, more documentary-based projects?



CM: *Nefandus* is a very visual project. It relies on objects and aesthetics to communicate, rather than on concept and discourse. The formal choices in this project turn objects into metaphors.

I use history in my recent work for a particular function. I end the video saying, “I seek to construct a lie in which I can see myself reflected.” It is about how I see myself (and us a society) in the present. As an artist and as a person, I want to find my place here. The idea of turning documentary material into material for construction of one’s own version of things is interesting. In all due respect to the indigenous elders, and their legacy—and I am sure they would forgive me for speculating about their traditions—I want to use what they left behind so that I can challenge the repressive discourses of the present.¹

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NOTE 1. For more information and documentation of Carlos Motta’s projects, visit <http://carlosmotta.com/projects>.

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