

Copyright  
by  
Alejandro Sánchez  
2011

**The Resport committee for Alejandro Sánchez**  
**Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**A Lack of Power**

**APPROVED BY**  
**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

---

Mark Goodman

---

Ann Reynolds

**A Lack of Power**

**by**

**Alejandro Sánchez, B.F.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2011**

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my wife, Maria Clara García, my mother, Sara Gallardo, my father, Benhur Sánchez, and my good friend, Santiago Forero, for encouraging me to dream and believe in my work.



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge Professor Mark Goodman for challenging me to see things in a different way. I would also like to thank Professors Teresa Hubbard, Ann Reynolds and Jack Stoney for their constant support, guidance and interest over the past three years.

## **Abstract**

### **A Lack of Power**

Alejandro Sanchez, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Mark Goodman

This graduate report, more than a formal description of the artistic developments I have gradually acknowledged, is a personal and perhaps arbitrary recollection of ideas that might help the reader—and me—understand the nature of the gestures that have evidently influenced the work I have produced in the past two years. These words belong to an inevitable act of introspection that seeks to validate some of the questions that have directed my artistic investigation throughout this time.

I believe my work derives from two different and yet relevant positions: on one hand, the need to find meaning out of brutal events that have indisputably marked the course of history, specially in Colombia—my home country—where victims appear to loose their voices in a context ruled by indifference and apathy; and, on the other, the desire to understand what controls the reception of violent imagery as we depend on how social location, collective identification and political affiliation dictate the way we perceive the world.

Each project mentioned in this report is a result of studying obsessively the political kidnappings that have been taking place in Colombia in the past twenty years, as

a response to an allegedly abuse of power induced by the government against Las FARC, one of the most powerful guerrilla groups in Latin America. However each one is far from being a true document of real events and on the contrary, each one emerges as a naïve interpretation, possibly an illustration, of an ambiguous conflict that has no reasonable explanation but being a natural product of a conservative warfare—which in fact is no less than a reading made by a distant and passive witness like myself.

## Table of Contents

List of Plates.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
A kind of History.....	5
Unraveling the voice.....	11
Figures.....	20
Bibliography.....	39

## List of Plates

Plate 1:	<i>More than a decade in the jungle</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 31 in, 2008.....	20
Plate 2:	<i>More than a decade in the jungle</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 31 in, 2008.....	21
Plate 3:	<i>More than a decade in the jungle</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 31 in, 2008.....	22
Plate 4:	<i>95 shots</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 10 x 16 in, 2008.....	23
Plate 5:	<i>95 shots</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 10 x 16 in, 2008.....	24
Plate 6:	<i>A story about kidnapping</i> , Print, 33 x 24 in 2008.....	25
Plate 7:	<i>A story about kidnapping</i> , Print, 33 x 24 in 2008.....	26
Plate 8:	<i>A story about kidnapping</i> , Print, 33 x 24 in 2008.....	27
Plate 9:	<i>A story about kidnapping</i> , Print, 33 x 24 in 2008.....	28
Plate 10:	<i>Composite No. 1</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 43 x 43 in, 2010.....	29
Plate 11:	<i>Composite No. 2</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 35 x 45 in, 2010.....	30
Plate 12:	<i>4468</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 10 x 14 in, 2011.....	31
Plate 13:	<i>I wish I could disappear</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 30 in, 2011.....	32
Plate 14:	<i>Talking Trees</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 14 in, 2011.....	33
Plate 15:	<i>An act of humiliation</i> , Three Channel Video, 5 minutes, 2011.....	34
Plate 16:	<i>Talking Trees</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 14 in, 2011.....	35
Plate 17:	<i>Talking Trees</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 14 in, 2011.....	36
Plate 18:	<i>Talking Trees</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 14 in, 2011.....	37
Plate 19:	<i>Talking Trees</i> , Archival Inkjet Print, 23 x 14 in, 2011.....	38

## Introduction

To begin a piece, there is first of all a testimony. Then comes the material object that has traces of everyday life... My task as an artist is to make sense out of brutal facts. My work is an attempt to make violent reality intelligible. Needless to say, a lifetime is not enough for such a task. In the third world we are well aware that human beings do not triumph over external reality. We must produce meaning out of the tensions and chaos generated by our harsh conditions. Making art is a way of understanding, a way of comprehending reality.

–Doris Salcedo

As I write these words, in a simple attempt to understand or perhaps validate the significance of my work, I suddenly realize the important role a primary and yet ambiguous question plays in the latest stage of an investigation I naively started in December of 2008 and which now has turned into an obsession that keeps infiltrating the gestures behind my practice as an artist. A few months back, I found the book titled *7 años secuestrado por las FARC (7 years kidnapped by Las FARC<sup>1</sup>)*—a book I heard about in 2008, which I mistakenly avoided when I first started my determined research. Luis Eladio Pérez, a Colombian politician who was kidnapped by the guerrillas and spent almost seven years waiting to be released, narrates the gruesome, dramatic and macabre moments he experienced as one of *FARC*'s political hostages in the jungles of Colombia. As I turned the pages, trying at least to make sense out of the natural suffering he describes in every paragraph, I realized a recurring question was considerably affecting my judgment, leaving substantial doubts in my mind: “(...) can you imagine?” Pérez kept

---

<sup>1</sup> *FARC* or *FARC-EP* stands for *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), which is one of the most powerful, dangerous and influential guerrilla groups in South America today.

asking repeatedly, exposing my vulnerability as an anesthetized reader. Was I prepared to imagine the pain, anguish, despair, anxiety or loss he was describing? Was I capable of answering what appeared to be such a basic question?

When I first started considering the Colombian context as a source of study, specifically the political kidnappings that have been affecting my home country in the past two decades, I tried to imagine myself as one of many hostages who have been forced to live in the jungle for more than five years—a thought I may describe as self-indulgent and narcissistic due to the fictional essence embedded in it. What does it mean to make such ridiculous suppositions? Evidently, I was not capable of neither imagining nor even understanding the true nature of such conflict or any other. And why would I even try to understand a reality that was and still is so distant from my personal experience?

It seems as though I was unconsciously envisioning myself as a victim, a captive in this absurd conflict based on the alarming events that have marked the history of a country subject of incessant violence. Perhaps that deceptive thought—that incongruous idea of picturing myself as a victim in the jungle being constantly humiliated, tormented and physically and psychologically tortured—became the foundation of a concept I could only try to explain through my artistic investigation (a concept that has brought even more significant questions into a process charged with angst, skepticism and consequently nurtured by speculation).

My work has been permeated by an uncontrollable need to use and possibly exploit the voices of victims who have suffered from violent incidents. In my case, I use specifically the Colombian context as a tool to elaborate additional expressive structures that might help make suffering comprehensible and therefore award it with some

meaning<sup>2</sup>—a pretentious aspiration that continues to feed personal interests as an artist, even if the outcome in theory may provide feasible answers.

My political concerns, moral and ethical contradictions, together with a direct repulsion towards injustice and corruption, in addition to an immediate preoccupation about our incapability of seeing the evidence of other's pain<sup>3</sup>, have driven me to create a sentimental fixation with suffering and endured violence present in different contexts. Pérez's complex words "(...) can you imagine?" are emblems of frustration and impossibility that I have come to identify now, after exploring different alternatives. His moving description of unfortunate events in some ways enables certain anxiety inside me, allowing me to feel compassion towards his irreversible history, but his persistent inquiry leads me to an uncomfortable state of hesitation, revealing my inability to comprehend or imagine the real loss, dementia or grief caused by such disturbing experiences. In that sense, my work—whether photography, video or any other form—presents itself as a direct response to a clear impossibility of comprehending any victim's sorrow and the frustration caused by finding myself as a disabled observer, with no power, with no judgment, completely anesthetized. As I come to realize how my work is functioning, I notice my only possibility is to find some kind of meaning out of the uncanny and troubled experiences that cover inch by inch the specifics of these stories, whether they come from Pérez's voice or any other that is waiting to be heard.

As Doris Salcedo once said when asked to explain the nature of her work, she immediately stated "art is nothing but a lack of power."<sup>4</sup> As I try to find the right words to describe the relevant gestures in my practice, I undeniably identify the power and

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, "Traffic in Pain" in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Duganne, ed., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the traffic in pain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 7 -8.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhardt and Edwards, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson F. Padilla, "El Arte es el contrapeso de la barbarie, entrevista con Doris Salcedo", *El Espectador* (May 2010): 48.



complexity of such statement—which is in one way or another, the confirmation that “art cannot act directly nor it can save anybody’s life; it can only keep ideas alive...”<sup>5</sup> Now I believe my work—as I discover an evident affiliation with Salcedo’s words—is the result of an accumulation of different kinds of impotence that belong in the first place, to an inability of avoiding a sense of compassion or pity after learning the troubled experiences many victims have suffered. Somehow, that leads me to the notion of anesthetization and lack of sensation caused by our relationship to images today, which are polluted immensely by an apparent symbiosis of suffering and spectacle<sup>6</sup> and that there is what stops us from looking closely. Then, there is a hopelessness produced by the incapacity to provide any sort of solution—politically measurable and socially applicable—to such disturbing realities. And finally, the simple idea of not knowing the truth and our incapability of seeing a reality that might change the way we perceive the world. As Salcedo would imply, “the sum of those impotences” is inevitably a sign of lack of power.

My desire, like any other artist that is acknowledging these kinds of intricate histories, is to force any type of change with every single piece I create. Unfortunately, in reality that aspiration is just a mere idealistic consideration that is far from any constructive and useful discourse. On the contrary, it appears as a pretentious, meaningless and even naïve thought. Nevertheless, that illusion—that romantic idea—is what makes this process conceptually valuable. Now I understand Salcedo’s words. We have no conclusive and tangible solutions. What we have left is the idea we can, in some way or another, make violence intelligible through different expressions, alternative

---

<sup>5</sup> Padilla, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, “Traffic in Pain” in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Duganne, ed., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the traffic in pain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 9.

forms, and multiple gestures that have the potential to promote controversy, generate discussions and endorse political activism. As contradictory as it may sound, what keeps me from becoming a insensitive mediator is the same force that pushes me to explore different solutions before abandoning any idea; is that same lack of power that provokes instant concerns inside me.

## **A kind of history**

“I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others”.

**-Edmund Burke**

Almost ten months ago I found an article about Doris Salcedo in one of the most influential newspapers in Colombia. I had finished a semester of graduate school in Austin, and I needed to go back to my home country to spend time with family and friends. I was staying at my mother’s apartment in Bogotá where I thought I was going to be able to hide at least for a few days and think about my work. It was a moment when I was trying to find answers regarding my process and intentions more than anything else. As cliché or romantic as it may seem, for the first time in many years I had a revelation. That newspaper, that article I was holding in my hand, contained what I believed was a statement that somehow I had been denying: “Art is the counterweight of barbarism”, (“el arte es el contrapeso de la barbarie”). This statement was the title of the interview, and they were the exact words Salcedo used to define art within a context that has a long history of violence-words that keep echoing in my head with great resonance.

In the 1940’s, Colombia was witnessing one of the cruelest civil wars ever to be registered—executions, massacres and persecutions—due to the eternal rivalry between two of the most influential and powerful political parties in the history of my country. People outside the big cities, mainly farmers and humble workers, were the direct victims of the misfortunes and corruption brought by such violent confrontation. Some of those farmers formed a revolutionary army called *FARC-EP*—an allegedly peaceful guerrilla group—with the illusion they could stand against the government’s misleading actions and protect

themselves from injustice and brutality. In an attempt to stop the war, both parties decided to negotiate and came to the conclusion that, by alternating the nation's power, the whole country was going to experience a political and economical transformation—one that could save the people from their misery. Unfortunately, that revolutionary force was left aside during such negotiations, what caused the group to become a communist Stalinist guerrilla—military organized and properly armed—whose only purpose was to take over the power. During the 1980's, the government tried to end any hostilities by suggesting a truce with the guerrillas through a specific political amendment. However, the communist group found ways to finance their own war thanks to the drug trafficking system that was invading the entire country and radically rejected any type of conciliation with any party. Since then, they have been involved in different illegal activities—kidnapping being one of the most profitable besides drug dealing and weaponry smuggling—in order to prolong their control in strategic areas around the country<sup>7</sup>.

I suddenly understood what I had been doing for the past few years is forcing myself not to forget or dismiss the significance of such a history—even when apathy starts to play a crucial role by limiting our perception in different ways. It seems as though I had been using Salcedo's words as a catalyst in order to understand what lies behind that endless history of suffering that appears as a *leitmotif* in a context where political incongruities are growing systematically. Salcedo has persuaded some of us to rethink how we see that brutal reality by finding a voice through the experience of victims—almost invisible for some—which have left a mark on our memory, like a prominent scar that reminds us everyday that the trauma experienced was real and not a product of our own imagination. And here I am trying to find sense in my practice of the responsibility I

---

<sup>7</sup> Ingrid Betancourt, *No hay silencio que no termine* (Florida: Aguilar, 2010), 52-53.

have recently acknowledged. I am an artist who is struggling to make sense of the terrible events that have affected Colombia's history in the past decades.

When I look back to my past, there is one event that might explain the reason why I have a sentimental fixation with my country's violent truth. I served in the Military Police in Bogotá, my hometown, when I was 18-years-old. There I had to face another reality, learn how to manipulate weapons, deal with discipline and orders, pretend to be strong, hide my fears and understand by any means what is the significance of being a soldier, a patriot. I never went into combat but that secluded experience was enough to make me realize the contradictions we are exposed to every day, when considering war as part of our everyday lives. It was a complex moment for me back then which later, without any expectations, gave purpose to an artistic investigation I consciously started only after getting my Bachelors Degree in Visual Arts.

As I type this statement, hoping I find answers to the big questions my practice constantly refers to, I notice the implications my background has in this basic story. South America, in general, has an obscure and dramatic history, from dictatorships to corruption, from disappearances to public executions, from mere cruelty to abuses of power, from intolerance to mere absurdity. And Colombia is no exception. We carry that enormous weight on our shoulders with fear, but we have forced ourselves to ignore, to forget, to evade. My mother often says "Colombia is a country without memory" and unfortunately she is right. We immediately disregard our reality, trading it for an illusion of harmony. Salcedo once said "we don't have Arcs of Triumph, or Nelson's Columns or obelisks; we have the ruins of war and of our own history"<sup>8</sup> ("no tenemos ni arcos del

---

<sup>8</sup> Nelson F. Padilla, "El Arte es el contrapeso de la barbarie, entrevista con Doris Salcedo", *El Espectador* (May 2010): 49.

triunfo, ni columnas de Nelson, ni obeliscos, tenemos ruinas de la Guerra y de nuestra historia”).

I refuse to ignore, to close my eyes. I need to remember; I need to understand. Perhaps my morbid impulse is allowing me to think things through in a different way. Salcedo is right; our responsibility as artists is to open spaces for our minds, our thoughts where brutality lies quietly<sup>9</sup>. We are telling the story of the defeated; the stories about the victims who have lost their voices after the tragic events that have affected their normal lives. All we have left is their almost disappearing trace and all we can feel is their silence—or better yet their muffled screams. They deserve our least consideration before we turn our head the other way.

Since I left my country with the hope of becoming an artist, I have been immersing myself gradually in what I once believed was just a formal investigation of violence and what I now have come to realize is more than a peculiar obsession—one charged with anger, frustration and fear. In a certain way, I have been wishing to scrutinize and decipher the ideas that force my work to include reiterative and ugly concepts in order to understand the purpose of my actions. The obsession I am referring to here relies on the idea of loss, pain, torture and disempowerment caused by a conflict between guerrillas—specifically *FARC-EP*—and the Colombian government, summarized in one particular activity: the political kidnappings that have been taking place since the mid 1990’s, which have had huge resonance due to the intense background that precedes them and all the lives they have destroyed. This recent and brutal history, more than a political model or a social anomaly, is an emotional wound that is far from healing. A permanent lesion that will always be present, painful, which might try to disappear in time but it will never go away, even if it is almost unperceivable. The basic idea of

---

<sup>9</sup> Padilla, 50.

exposing this history—this wound—in order to compose a discourse that might step away from any aestheticism, all of a sudden becomes a political act—one I fear can be ignored immediately by any audience.

A memory of violence has always been a crucial element inside my process, perhaps the core of the work I have created until now. However, that memory, like any other memory, serves as a reference point that can only depend on an individual experience, a secluded event. In a way, that experience relates solely to my situation as a distant witness, as a person who has seen his own country be consumed by a history of injustice, corruption and hostility. Despite my naïve idea of violence drawn from my position as a spectator and not a victim, it is almost impossible to deny the influence of that memory, especially when history seems to repeat itself over and over with enormous resonance. As an artist I use the intimate reminiscence of violence I have decoded in my head, in order to assume a position, a stance that pursues the idea of protest but is charged with impotence and silence. I have come to realize the truth about the powerlessness that infects and triggers my work simultaneously. Salcedo's words "art is a lack of power" could never make more sense.

## **Unraveling the voice**

I know that art doesn't act directly. I know that I cannot save anybody's life, but art can keep ideas alive, ideas that can influence directly our everyday lives, our daily experiences.

**–Doris Salcedo**

I am an eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, I am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.

**–Dziga Vertov**

### **I**

Being conscious of how the recent history of violence in Colombia has affected my own experience and memory, forces me to find different ways of interpreting the sources I use in my practice as an artist. Relevant elements in some of the stories regarding such history infused my work with a sense of disbelief, trauma and even anxiety. A number of those stories deal with death, suffering and pain. Others reinforce ideas of fear, doubt and dementia. But all of them address the presence of the oppressed, reduced to a suppressed voice that lingers unidentifiable. They are the stories of victims that have been marked by history but forgotten in time. They are testimonies charged with misery and desolation, where the oppressor appears as the only source of power. What remains of the victims' voices, perhaps, is impotence. An impotence that blinds us, that denies us the possibility of knowing the truth, and that is understood as disempowerment, incredulity and weakness. My work is a response to my immediate frustration and my morbid interpretation. It is a reaction to the traces left by extreme



experiences and endured violence present in specific contexts. It is based on a history of violence that has affected the way I perceive the world.

I am an artist who uses photography and video to contribute to a discourse that pretentiously wishes to make suffering intelligible. I work with images that force the viewer to look closely, to scrutinize and find something that appears to be a glitch (Plates 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). For me, the difficulty reading photographs is when both, reality and fiction are assembled together in order to create an atmosphere that might confuse the viewer. A rhetoric inserted in an aesthetic thrill, as a meditation about the meanings of violence and what prevails in the reception of images. I am trying to decipher the intention of photography, when it portrays an exaggerated world in order to emphasize a reality that we refuse to admit or a world that is not entirely clear (Plates 6, 7, 8 and 9). I start to think about what motivates artists to create images based on horror and violence. Perhaps the notion that we can potentially forget the effects violence has brought upon society and the imminent fear of being desensitized, may be the starting point for many artists who are not willing to be undermined or corroded by indifference.

What might impact us overall? What might impact me overall? Such an intriguing question emerges when a complex meditation on imagery of cruelty, ugliness and artificiality keeps echoing in my head. The immediate challenge is to respond to that idea of visual collision, based on the reflection on what photography is dealing with presently. Many would be interested in knowing what motivates the tendency to constitute a dialogue between reality and grotesque fiction. Even more than when we establish that photographs “are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye.”<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps that is what we imply when talking about the authenticity of what

---

<sup>10</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 26.

is being shown in a picture. We should feel compelled to think about what it means to look at horror and the ability to understand what it shows<sup>11</sup>.

## II

I would like to think my work could give expression to extreme experiences, without describing the real events themselves. Perhaps, an imaginative discourse takes place in the process of collecting, studying and editing the sources I find constantly—sources found in Internet, journals and books. A body of work emanates as a direct response to a series of unnerving anecdotes extracted from each and every testimony I have come across. Some projects consist of narrative elements that relate to a historical reality but never provide objective information (Plates 6, 7, 8 and 9). On the contrary, rather confusing fragments of a non-identifiable and yet provocative realism materialize as a result. In an odd way, those ideas are just a mere confrontation with the sources, with no directness. Where do I stand, where is the author then? If I try to think about the precision of my strategy, many questions emerge in terms of the gaze, the power of display and a certain distance between the subject matter, the viewer and me. The lack of political space present in my work denotes a scarce deconstruction of the events I use, I exploit, and instead brings up issues about the construction of political fiction that can be created, as well as the value of impact. But what is the meaning of impact at this point?

In my process of becoming an artist I have been urged to talk about politics and violence in a way that I could create a distance between documentation and an almost fictional space (Plates 10 and 11). Although my immediate references come from real events, I have stepped away—consciously and unconsciously—from specificity and objectiveness, and instead I have submerged myself in an emotional and fragile arena;

---

<sup>11</sup> Sontag, 95.

one that becomes extremely ambiguous and lacks any specific point of reference determining the historical foundation I am utilizing. It seems as though the appropriation, manipulation and transformation of the real sources, have allowed me to move in different directions but at the same time, they have allowed me to avoid a moral responsibility that is created with a complex subject matter such as kidnapping.

At this point the aesthetic choices in most of my projects have prevailed over the political essence of my sources. Now the contradiction is clear. What I believed could be a political act-just by using my sources without any manipulation-is now an act of distortion and perhaps distraction. Is it necessary to inform the viewer about the context that is being exploited, or, on the contrary, is it important to address a visual experience charged with uncertainty and anxiety that only suggests a violent history?

One of the twenty “red portraits” from the series titled *4468* (Plate 12) provides a useful example. What are we confronted with? Is it a portrait of a security guard, a policeman or perhaps an officer from the army? What is the context? Do we know it? This is certainly an image that provokes several readings. Even if we are not aware of the context, we are capable of understanding the associations with war and authority embedded in the image, due to our relation with images today. We can place it in a gruesome and perhaps dramatic arena that brings certain concern. The information is obscured in such a way that we cannot discern much from it. We can see a face but not a recognizable one. It may come from any context and that appear to be disconcerting, if not confusing to the unexpected viewer. It is charged with doubt, horror and death that the color suggests. It is a simple portrait, but a “red portrait” that hopes to trigger an idea silence. A silence caused by our preconceptions about war, tragedy and brutality or a victim’s silence that is the last trace left from a traumatic experience. It is a portrait that makes me imagine and at the same time makes me question its legitimacy.

### III

My work has focused exclusively on the manipulation of found data from the Internet. A series of uncanny and gruesome images have been the sources of my current process. Nevertheless, these images are not only referencing the number of victims—politicians, soldiers and military—that have been kidnapped in the jungles of Colombia for a long time. At this point, and for the first time, they are involving the oppressor as a figure of power inside my work. It might be read to a certain extent as a form of compassion for the oppressor. However, it incorporates another voice into my work, a voice I was expecting to find—even though it might be successful or on the contrary it might distract attention from the cause. In both cases, the imagery used as templates—from captor to captive—functions as devices of representation that might give a glimpse of a singular context. But in reality, they only address the need to interact with the objects created through a visual experience that activates our emotions and senses. Or at least, that is the pretentious purpose of some of the series.

In this case, one of the six “black portraits” from the series *I wish I could disappear* (Plate 13) introduces the presence of the oppressor in a similar way to the “red portraits”. By obscuring the information and denying clarity, the viewer is asked to look at the portrait closely enough, so that in the end a face is revealed. It is an act of seduction that forces the interaction with the viewer, who can only bring life to the piece. Black is not only obscuring the information, but also working as a referential element. Black denotes a visual correspondence to a memorial, a device to pay tribute to the lives that have been lost through the brutality of war. Black is a tool that adds a different dimension. But what is the purpose of implying the idea of a memorial with the faces of assassins, terrorists and monsters? It is a way of declaring that they will never be forgotten; and, on the contrary, they will always be remembered for what they did, for

what they caused. It is a sort of homage to the victims by exploiting the captor's face as an instrument of protest. An homage that allows the viewer to see those faces and in some way may force to question their humanity. In some way, this is also an act of commiseration upon them. In order to understand the nature of the conflict one must first feel compassion for the oppressor.

I am still trying to give expression to extreme experiences through my work. An imaginative discourse takes place in this meticulous process of finding, collecting, studying and editing the sources I choose. Although it appears like a redundant and reiterative method, every story brings up a different conflict with its own contradictions and its own sense of drama. That is what motivates me to exhaust every possibility before working with a new source of inspiration. I am still using a historical reality that never transcends and yet remains confusing, with no directness. That is why text has become such a relevant element in some of the series I create (Plate 14). Words try to extract the ambiguity and distance by bringing back pieces of information that contextualizes the viewer in a tragic context that is not completely specified. I believe text works as a separate image that creates variation, instead of becoming a didactic basis for explaining everything. It is an indistinct compliment that adds a dramatic value by using real statements, the real voices of people that have experienced the absurdity of captivity.

With some of the series I worked with in the past five months, I intend to generate a perceptual experience that forces a different aesthetic reading. The viewer needs to move back and forth to get an idea of the inscrutable essence of what is presented. Pixelation, manipulation of the real sources and transformation of the primary data forces an active interaction. Whether it serves as an important element with regards to the subject matter or simply comes from merely an aesthetic choice, it appears to add more

complexity to the body of work (Plate 15). And yet again, it extends the political aspect even further, to a point where it might not have any relevance.

On the other hand, the viewer is confronted with a direct, predictable and overly staged series of images that are the result of a naïve interpretation about one particular fact. The series titled, *Talking Trees*, attempts to depict the eerie story of Luis Eladio Pérez, who constantly spoke to trees in an absurd effort to keep himself sane (Plates 16, 17, 18 and 19). However, its depiction, more than a complex construction and accumulation of ideas, is a predictable and yet poetic illustration based on just one detail of Pérez's entire description. This series is the clear confirmation of what I have redundantly analyzed throughout this document, the impossibility of understanding and the frustration caused by my inability to imagine such complex and absurd situations.

#### IV

Every single series, whether it is photography or video, allows the subject matter to transcend in a direction that is difficult to grasp, based on the real events that these ideas are taken from. Sometimes they seem to inform each other in a cohesive manner. Nevertheless, they distract from the point of reference, as if they belong to different moments, different histories. I consider my work touching the boundaries of what is considered the archive of a contemporary world. My obsessive connection with the subject matter forces me to believe I am creating a personal archive that not only documents specific events but also allows a complex voice to emerge from the reality and directness of the source. By appropriating several images taken from the Internet, which belong to a form of collective memory and trying to fool us by becoming an apparently true document, I allow the appearance of a statement that insinuates the idea of a genuine photographic record. An idea that covers the true essence of a record that perhaps refers

to a particular event but has no legitimacy due to its mediated background. In a sense, those records reference an obscure version of a real conflict, a reliable history, and ultimately force a reading that is affected by actual facts, but in reality moves away from any kind of specificity.

In some way, photography implies that—and perhaps film and video may share certain similarities—the camera functions as an archival machine<sup>12</sup>, a recording artifact that points out a ‘truth’ seen only by the lens. The photographer becomes that apparatus and his eye transforms itself into that machine. The photograph is the archival object that gains meaning over time, transcending into a dimension that rejects the presence of the creator. The absence of the author gives value to an unexpected reading. All of a sudden the viewer, the reader is free to understand, interpret and translate to his own words the connotations surrounding the historical artifact. But what happens when the image itself depends on the visual manipulation in order to exist—being its most important intent? In that case, can the photograph be considered a historical artifact as well?

This vague and ambiguous statement makes me question the real functionality my work has, especially when the images I manipulate become elements of seduction, objects that have been obscured to an extent that their aesthetic qualities prevail over any real contextualization. I would like to think some of the photographic pieces I have produced—portraits for the most part—depend on a complex psychology of persuasion. They intend to capture the viewer’s attention by using a simple and yet reiterative strategy: inscrutability, ambiguity and lack of clarity as means to beautify suffering. Perhaps this is a story about images that requires the reader—the unexpected viewer—to focus on what Dziga Vertov would refer as the fragments of actuality which, when organized together, have a deeper truth that cannot be seen with the naked eye.

---

<sup>12</sup> Enwezor Okwui, *Archive Fever* (New York: International Center of Photography–Steidl, 2008), 11 – 13.

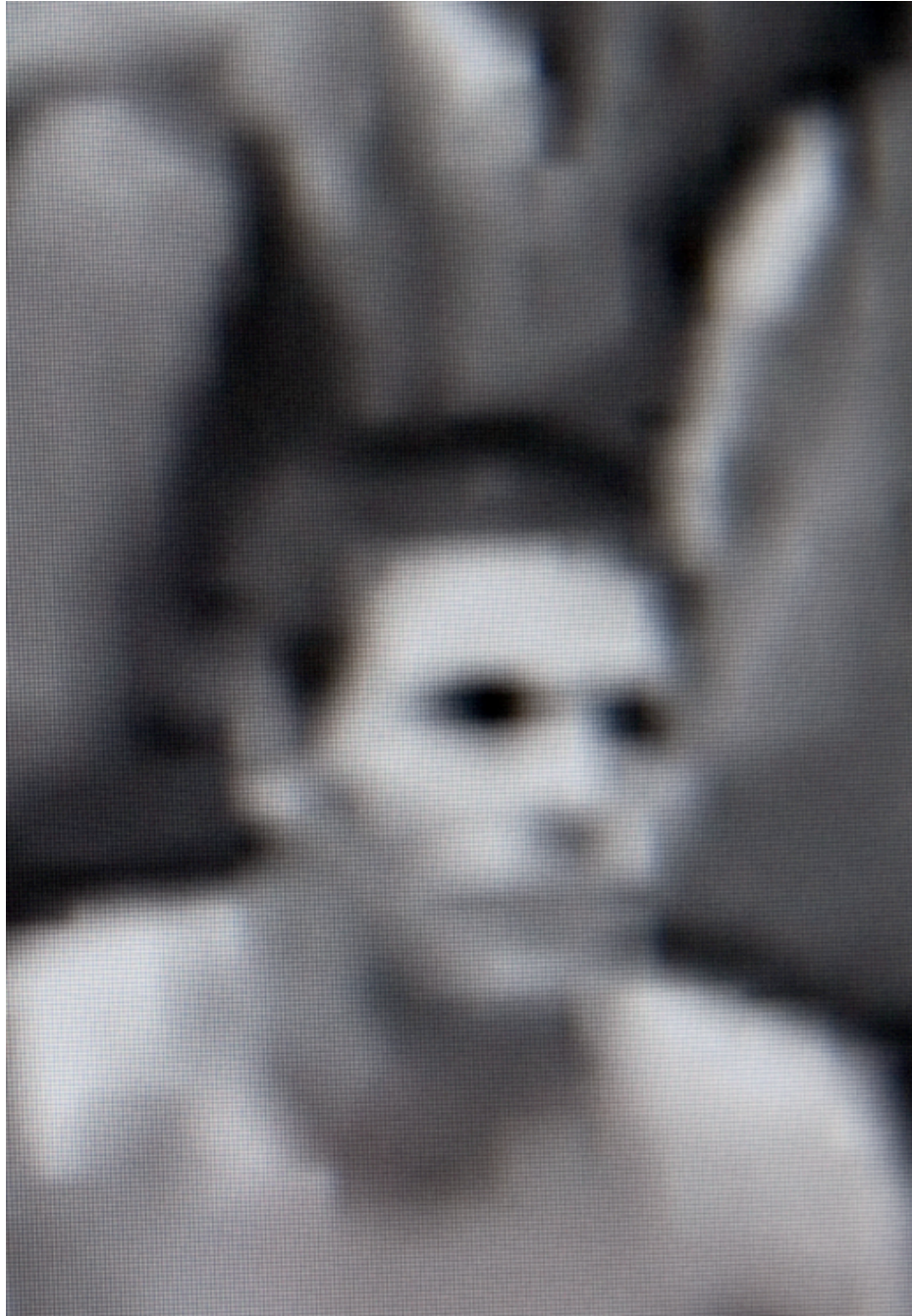
Definitely, my work creates elements that allow contemplation to exist. My photographs are not just emblems of suffering, but channels that perform an act of hypnotism with the mediation of my hand. They dig into the obscure intersection that lies between of reality and fiction. They dig into my brain. Evidence reveals my vulnerability. But that is not a negative thing. “There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking.”<sup>13</sup> Thinking about what horror implies, many questions appear regarding this issue and yet no specific answers. What is being analyzed in this essay is an unclear cycle in which assumptions play a significant role. Nonetheless, we reach that point where we might ask ourselves if it is relevant to “look at the world closely enough and with enough insistence to end by revealing the cruelty and ugliness,” as Erich Von Stroheim says. Or close our eyes and pretend nothing happens. “The photographs are a means of making “real” (or more ‘real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.” Should we follow this statement, even if we are seduced by images such as the “red” and “black portraits”? My work is notoriously a case of Salcedo’s “lack of power”.

---

<sup>13</sup> Sontag, 118.



**Plate 1**



**Plate 2**





**Plate 3**



## Plate 4



eight shots four in the legs, one in the chest

**Plate 5**





**Plate 6**





**Plate 7**





**Plate 8**





**Plate 9**



**Plate 10**



**Plate 11**

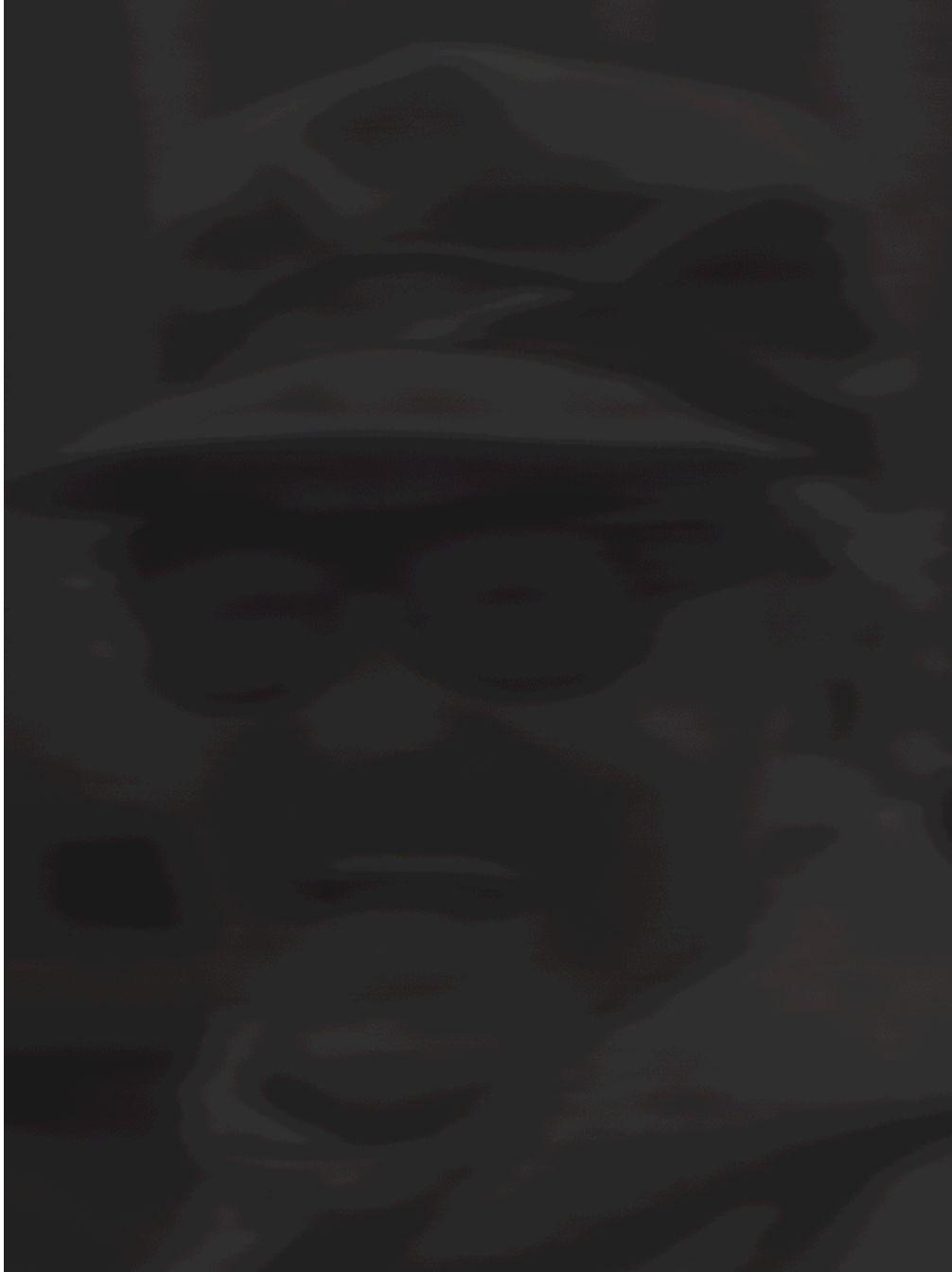


**Plate 12**





**Plate 13**



## Plate 14

El olor a selva es un olor bastante particular, un olor húmedo, a tierra, sí, es como de humedad,  
un olor que se impregna en la ropa, en la piel, que se expelle en el sudor. ¡Ese olor a selva!

**Plate 15**



**Plate 16**





**Plate 17**



**Plate 18**





**Plate 19**



## Bibliography

Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, “Traffic in Pain” in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Duganne, ed., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the traffic in pain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Nelson F. Padilla, “El Arte es el contrapeso de la barbarie, entrevista con Doris Salcedo”, *El Espectador* (May 2010).

Ingrid Betancourt, *No hay silencio que no termine* (Florida: Aguilar, 2010).

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

Enwezor Okwui, *Archive Fever* (New York: International Center of Photography–Steidl, 2008).

Luis Eladio Pérez, Dario Arismendi, *7 años secuestrado por las FARC*, (Florida: Aguilar, 2008).