



ME VOY PA' CALI: RECLAIMING A REGIONAL IDENTITY AND PRACTICE¹

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In a recent essay narrating the history of Helena Producciones, the Cali-based artist collective he cofounded in 1998, Wilson Díaz contextualizes the Colombian art scene of the late 1990s against a backdrop of violence, economic depression, and general cultural malaise that characterized the decade.² For a city still reeling from the impact of the brutal drug cartel that had been active there between 1977 and 1998,³ and shaken by a phase of corruption and greed in the 1980s that nearly destroyed its already delicate social fabric, this period seemed particularly bleak even in a region long accustomed to the effects of war and social conflict. Significantly, the pessimism that motivated Díaz and a group of like-minded art professors and recent art school graduates to actively contribute to bettering the cultural landscape of Cali was premised upon a nostalgia for the city's golden age—the 1970s—when an incredibly vital artistic community had emerged, transforming this small, peripheral city into an important cultural center that became a reference point for successive generations of cultural practitioners from other parts of the country and throughout Latin America. With its first major project, *Terror y escape* (Terror and Escape), in 1999, Helena explicitly reclaimed this historical lineage by drawing upon “tropical gothic”—a local tradition articulated in the writings of Andrés Caicedo and the films of Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, among others.⁴ *Terror y escape* included a film series, a publication, and an exhibition featuring canonical works from the 1970s as well as more recent projects by young artists from Cali and Bogotá.

04. View of Cali from Cristo Rey hill

The 1970s was a time of tremendous growth in Cali, spurred by an influx of rural migrants who had been displaced by the armed conflict that began in 1948, following the assassination of presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Industrialization also played a significant role in the city's transformation: after the United States drastically limited the import of Cuban sugar in 1960, Colombia became a leading sugar exporter, with Cali as its largest production hub. This tropical city is famous for its lively street culture, its status as a burgeoning center of salsa music, and the friendly disposition of its inhabitants, whose warmth and willingness to look beyond class and racial barriers stand in contrast to the guarded, mistrustful temperament often attributed to Bogotanos, the residents of Colombia's capital city. Cali has nevertheless suffered from the problems endemic to a hierarchical society whose economic structure is based on exploitation and inequality. Such contradictions naturally drew the attention of artists such as Caicedo, a young writer and aspiring filmmaker with an obsession for macabre subjects, the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and American horror films. Although his prolific output was chiefly published after his suicide in 1977, Caicedo became a leading figure in the creation of a literary and visual language that addressed the precarious and conflicted nature of Colombian urban culture but was influenced as well by the global countercultural, revolutionary spirit characteristic of those years.

Caicedo was part of a group of visual artists, filmmakers, and writers associated with Ciudad Solar, the country's first alternative space. Founded by Hernando Guerrero in a nineteenth-century mansion his family owned in downtown Cali, Ciudad Solar (1971–77, pl. 95) featured an art gallery, a darkroom, a printmaking studio, a store selling artisan goods, and temporary living quarters for participating artists, whose presence lent the space a communal atmosphere. Caicedo screened films every week in the building's large central courtyard, and these gatherings—called the Cine Club de Cali and frequented by Mayolo and Ospina as well as film historian Ramiro Arbeláez—were seminal to the development of the unique film culture in the city that was later dubbed “Caliwood.”⁵ The activities of Ciudad Solar provided many young filmmakers, artists, and curators with the opportunity to initiate



04. Ciudad Solar during the filming of *Ángela y Miguel Ángel* (1971, directed by Andrés Caicedo and Carlos Mayolo). Production photo by Eduardo Carvajal. Revised, from left: Andrés Caicedo and actors Jaime Acosta and Guillermo Florez. Courtesy Eduardo Carvajal

their practices. Mayolo and Ospina gave the space production credit for their first collaborative film, *Oiga vea* (Listen Look, 1971), although, in reality, this was purely a gesture of solidarity. That same year, Miguel González (today an established cultural figure who long held the position of curator of the Museo La Tertulia in Cali) was in charge of the Ciudad Solar art gallery, where artists including Oscar Muñoz and Fernell Franco first showed their work. According to González, those associated with the space were united by their interest in urban themes that had previously been unexplored in Colombian art, film, and literature. Perhaps the most emblematic work in this vein was that of Franco, a photographer whose traumatic biography mirrored much of the drama and instability of a society in conflict.⁶ Unlike many of his friends at Ciudad Solar, Franco did not come from an affluent family; he was among the thousands

who had fled the countryside to settle in Cali's poor, marginalized neighborhoods. As a photojournalist in the 1960s he documented rural massacres as well as riots in some of the city's toughest areas before meeting Alegre Levy, a young cultural reporter who introduced Franco to the realm of art and culture, allowing him to discover the aesthetic possibilities of a medium whose technical aspects he had mastered so well. Although Franco would never establish himself as a full-time, professional artist and continued for many years to sustain his photographic practice by working in advertising, he produced several extraordinary series documenting the various stages of urban destruction and transformation in Cali and neighboring areas, becoming something of a cult figure for subsequent generations. Among his most celebrated series is *Prostitutas* (Prostitutes, 1970, pl. 96), a group of black-and-white photographs of



05. Fernell Franco, *Unfried*, from the series *Prostitutas* (Prostitutes), 1970. Gelatin silver print, 10 1/2 x 27 1/2 in. (49 x 70 cm). Courtesy Fundación Fernell Franco

women and girls working in one of the last brothels in Buenaventura, a declining city that had once been a prosperous port. He first showed the work at Ciudad Solar, and it was restaged by Helena Producciones almost three decades later—along with works by Caicedo, Mayolo, Ospina, and Muñoz—in an effort to preserve the achievements of that generation while positing the need for a renewed aesthetic engagement with a society still in crisis.

Shortly after *Terror y escape*, Helena began focusing exclusively on the activity for which it has become best known: the organization of the Festival de Performance de Cali. Initiated by Wilson Díaz and Juan Mejía (prior to the existence of the collective) in 1997, the festival began as a relatively informal one-day event that featured (among other actions) an artist who quietly defecated in the corner and then ate what he had excreted with slices of bread and

apples;⁷ an invitation to snort lines of cocaine forming letters that spelled out the names of canonical figures such as Joseph Beuys and Hélio Oiticica; and a serenade to a lover on the eve of his departure from the country. Like the collective itself, with its constantly shifting configuration of members, the festival experienced many transformations, mostly related to funding, over the next decade.⁸ Yet its spontaneous, sometimes chaotic, and democratic character endured. As a forum in which a great many artists—both emerging and established, Colombian and international—have participated, the festival helped resuscitate the vitality and status of the cultural scene of a city that once contributed greatly to the country's artistic and cultural patrimony. The medium of performance, with its economical nature and inherent element of surprise (as Mejía has pointed out, you never know what the work will be until it has taken



97. Colectivo Pornomiseria, *Obra social: Un espectáculo de rehabilitación (Social Cleansing: A Rehabilitation Spectacle)*, 2006. Performance at the Festival de Performance de Cali VI, April 29, 2006. Courtesy Helena Producciones

place), has proved most appropriate to the precarious, unstable context of life in Cali.

A review of the performances, interventions, workshops, exhibitions, lectures, and other events that have been part of the Festival de Performance de Cali over the years (see pp. 78–93) provides a comprehensive picture of contemporary art in Cali and Bogotá. The festival's very structure encourages artists to engage critically with the local context, and the opportunity to create interventions in public spaces has led to diverse performances. Carolina Caycedo, for *Ser cateño* (Being from Cali, 1999, pl. 116), videotaped conversations with locals who were asked to describe the city and their attitudes toward it. Santiago Sierra's 2002 *Lona suspendida de la fachada de un edificio* (Canvas Suspended from a Building Facade, pl. 131), a giant American flag mounted on the exterior of the Museo La Tertulia, was vandalized within days by local

agitators, much to the artist's dismay, and had to be removed.⁹ *El Vicio TV* (2006, pl. 138) was a mobile television studio mounted by the Bogotá video collective El Vicio Producciones; passersby as well as other festival artists were invited to perform spontaneously, and the resulting variety show-type footage was edited into a documentary about the festival later broadcast on national television. The emergence of dialogues between festival works from different years has been particularly interesting; for example, Rosenberg Sandoval's performances with homeless adolescents in the second and third festivals (1998 and 1999) were protested in the sixth festival (2006) by Colectivo Pornomiseria (Poverty Porn Collective), a group of artists who bathed homeless people in a busy plaza and then asked them to don white T-shirts with *Obra social* (Social Work) printed on them (pls. 97, 132). In addition to critiquing the ethics of



98. A book from the collection of La Escuela de Esgrima con Machete de Puerto Tejada (Puerto Tejada School of Machete Fencing), n.d. Courtesy Helena Producciones

Sandoval's work, the group cited an important local cultural reference: Mayolo and Ospina had coined the term *pornomiseria* in *Agarrando pueblo* (known in English as *The Vampires of Poverty*), their 1978 satire of exploitative Colombian documentary films (see pp. 98, 100–101). The festival has also fostered an engagement with political and social issues that have connected with a wider audience. For example, the fifth festival (2002) received extensive media coverage in response to an act of self-mutilation by French artist Pierre Pinoncelli (pl. 130), who cut off part of his pinky to protest the kidnapping of presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia: FARC) earlier that year.

In 2005 Helena was selected to curate the *II Salón Regional de Artistas, zona Pacífico*, one of many annual exhibitions organized by the Colombian

cultural ministry. In response to the methodology of these conventional Colombian *salón*-style exhibitions,¹⁰ which tend to favor a predictable roster of local artists and works likely seen numerous times before, Helena conducted field research in remote cities and towns in the departments (that is, states) of Cauca, Chocó, and Valle del Cauca, large portions of which have long been isolated due to the extreme violence experienced there. The resulting exhibition not only included a number of self-taught artists but also sought to expand the terrain of the visual arts to include a broader arena of cultural and social practices, thus breaking with the elitist, hierarchical character of typical *salóns*. One of the most interesting participants was a fencing school from Puerto Tejada (pl. 133), where descendants of slaves continue to practice a tradition unique to the area, fencing with machetes. They use the blades in their daily lives as

sugarcane workers; however, because the machete was frequently employed as a weapon throughout Colombian history, it also carries powerful symbolism. During the wars for independence, slaves were trained in the art of fencing and then sent to battle. Many of those who survived were able to escape, and the practice of this once aristocratic activity was appropriated and transmitted, secretly, from generation to generation. The sport was transformed and further developed through a series of illustrated handmade books that were carefully preserved by the school's founders (pl. 98).

The experience of curating the *salón* proved significant to Helena, prompting its members to conceive of new working methods and formats with which to research and help preserve small slices of cultural history and tradition such as the Puerto Tejada story—an important contribution in a country fragmented by geographic barriers, class and racial hierarchies, and violence. Since 2005 they have conducted numerous workshops and community-oriented projects throughout the country's Pacific region as part of an initiative they call *La Escuela Móvil de Saberes y Práctica Social de Helena Producciones* (Helena Producciones Traveling School of Knowledge and Social Practice, pl. 110), which is funded by the cultural ministry. Always collaborative in nature, the projects are informed by discussions with community members that clarify local interests and how Helena's presence can be of benefit. They have initiated a wide range of activities, including (to name just a few) a painting workshop with children at an indigenous reserve where community leaders are actively trying to resuscitate a language and culture threatened with extinction; a palm-weaving workshop in a *palenque*, or settlement of former slaves, that also involved discussions about the sustainability of microenterprises; and, in the provincial city of Popayán, a symposium at which Colombian art professionals discussed the viability of practicing art in their country. Social engagement enacted by visual artists is often a polemical issue, and in Colombia it has been a point of contention for decades. The *Escuela Móvil* is unusual because it functions as a pedagogical project, the results of which are meant to be retained by the communities it serves rather than used as raw material for artworks made and disseminated in a very different context. The school gives Helena the rare experience of engaging with social and historical

formations that have been systematically excluded from official cultural discourse in Colombia (and are often much more interesting than what transpires in the Colombian art world), while it challenges the conventional understanding of what it means to be an artist. It also provides the economic means to sustain the collective and the practices of individual members.

Despite the renewal of the art scene in Cali in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many artists continued to migrate to the capital, Bogotá, to attend school and/or to sustain their practices as artists by accepting teaching positions at the country's major universities. Although Cali had long been recognized for producing a disproportionately large number of interesting visual artists given its size and distance from the capital city, Bogotá was still very much the center of activity. Its more conventional infrastructure of museums as well as commercial, university, and municipal galleries had managed to create an active, if fragmented, art scene while nevertheless failing to contribute productively to the development of critical or experimental tendencies within it. There were important if fleeting precedents in Bogotá for independent, self-organized initiatives, including *Gaula* (1990–91), followed by *Espacio Vacío* (Empty Space),¹¹ which endured for six years (1997–2003) but, as artist Víctor Albarracín wrote, “ended up honoring its own name, as its final exhibitions progressively lost the public's interest, resulting in a space that was almost literally empty.”¹² The early 2000s were marked by two initiatives that developed more coherent models of institutional critique. With its notably structured, international program, *Espacio La Rebeca* (2002–5) became the first independent space in Colombia to receive funding from international foundations.¹³ Its unexpected closure precipitated the opening of *El Bodegón*—an exceptionally vital, locally oriented space that also closed prematurely (in 2008), after several inexplicably unsuccessful attempts to acquire operating grants from both Colombian and non-Colombian sources. It seems that the very lack of a stable cultural infrastructure in Cali—along with its character as a tropical city whose slow pace and sociability contrasted markedly with the cold and rainy climate and conservative mind-set of Bogotá—has necessitated the kind of artist-run culture that has yet to be fully appreciated in the capital.

In 2003 Oscar Muñoz began to conceive an ambitious new project for Cali based on his experience



06. Lugar a Dudas, Calle 16 Noroeste, 8N-41, Barrio Granada, Cali

with *Ciudad Solar* as well as his knowledge of similar initiatives throughout Latin America. Inaugurated two years later in a beautiful old house that Muñoz purchased and restored, *Lugar a Dudas* (A Place to Doubt)¹⁴ attempted to create a stable, sustainable cultural center in Cali but also fulfilled Muñoz's desire for greater personal interaction with both his peers and a growing community of emerging artists.¹⁵ It is important to note that *Lugar a Dudas* (pls. 99–103) was neither posited as an alternative to local institutions (such as the *Museo La Tertulia* or Cali's art school, the *Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes*) nor intended to critique them; rather, it was positioned as a complementary space that welcomed collaboration and partnerships, aiming to preserve the city's cultural and artistic legacy while providing greater incentive for young artists, writers, curators, and filmmakers to stay in Cali.

Lugar a Dudas—located in a traditional residential neighborhood that has seen many homes leveled or converted into bars, restaurants, and boutiques catering to the *nouveaux riches* engaged in the city's drug trade—also represents a small but significant gesture toward preserving an urban fabric threatened with imminent destruction. Adjacent to the front courtyard is a small gallery, always visible to passersby through a plate-glass window, which regularly features new exhibitions. It is here, and in a larger gallery space inside the house, that *Lugar a Dudas* presents a range of art—from new pieces by young Colombian artists to canonical works by established international figures. But art exhibitions are not the emphasis of this project; rather, *Lugar a Dudas* has focused on developing a residency program for local and international artists and organizing a film club with weekly screenings. Arguably the organization's most significant



109–110. Recent events at Lugar a Dudas: Latin American Studies reading group organized by Cocodrilo Azul, March 22, 2012 (top left); “No es gusto, es arte,” a talk by artist in residence Kadja de Paula and Claudia Patricia Serré-Macias of Helena Producciones, February 4, 2012 (top right, bottom right); and Paola Gaviria, *En vitrina*, live drawing performance, August 13–September 2, 2010 (bottom left).

contribution is its library and archive, which is free and open to the public; its holdings include previously scarce or inaccessible primary sources documenting Cali’s cultural history as well as publications covering contemporary art and theory in a global context. The library’s collections were formed primarily through gifts, and they include, for example, an impressive and comprehensive archive of Colombian film history donated by Ramiro Arbeláez. By offering a broad range of resources to its community and providing a base of operations for artists visiting Cali, Lugar a Dudas has succeeded in supporting many layers of

local culture—as a research center, a platform for dialogue and exchange, a place to see art and attend lectures, and simply as an inviting space to meet with friends and hang out on the café patio, enjoying the afternoon breeze for which the city is famous.

Ten years ago, Cali would probably not have been on the itinerary of an artist or curator visiting Colombia for the first time. Today, thanks in part to the activities of Helena and Lugar a Dudas, this has changed. In the precarious context of cities like Cali, claiming a place on the global cultural map strengthens the local scene and the visibility of its

artists; however, sustainability, consistency, and longevity are equally important goals. In the face of such challenges, efforts to identify, package, and export local art scenes for international consumption (an occupation of which the art world has become quite fond in the last two decades) can seem trivial. The tension created by these competing interests can be felt within Colombia, where there has been a tendency to generate a great deal of hype around the city’s so-called revival: in 2008 the *Salón Nacional de Artistas* was moved from its usual setting in Bogotá to a group of venues in Cali—including and subsuming, to some extent, both Helena and Lugar a Dudas. The salón’s extensive roster of international artists was

unprecedented, and it attracted an equally international audience to what seemed to be yet another large-scale biennial in an exotic location. Visitors who ventured away from the exhibition’s major installations, however, had the opportunity to see Ciudad Solar reconstructed at its original site—a testament to a time when the city was still unburdened by the demands and expectations of a globalized art world. Ciudad Solar’s re-creation for the salón was an important reminder that this previous generation in Cali remains present in the minds of those committed to preserving and building upon the cultural legacy of that period in local history.

1. “Me voy pa’ Cali,” which translates as “I’m Going to Cali,” is the title of a hit 1992 song by Venezuelan salsa star Oscar D’León.

2. See Wilson Díaz, “Una versión de la historia de Helena Producciones,” in Helena Producciones, *Festival de Performance de Cali-Colombia* (Cali, Colombia: Helena Producciones, 2006), 7–25.

3. Sadly, outside Colombia, Cali is perhaps best known for the product exported by the cartels.

4. Mayolo described “tropical gothic” as a Latin American variant of British or Southern gothic literature and film. His two feature-length films, *Carne de tu carne* (Flesh of Your Flesh, 1983) and *La mansión de araucaima* (The Mansion of Araucaima, 1986), are paradigmatic of the genre, as are Ospina’s *Pura sangre* (Pure Blood, 1982) and Caicedo’s unfinished novel *Noche sin fortuna* (Unfortunate Night, 1976).

5. For a brief overview and comprehensive bibliography of Colombian cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, see my article “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to Make a Documentary Film,” *Afterall* 21 (Summer 2009): 5–15.

6. Between 2001 and 2004, Colombian curator and researcher María Iovino conducted a series of fascinating conversations with Franco about his life and the development of his work. An extracted, translated version can be found in Fernell Franco, *Fernell Franco: Antarrados [BOUND]* (New York: Americas Society, 2009), 28–57.

7. A concise interpretation of this rather extreme action is offered by Juan Mejía: “[Fernando] Pertuz had traveled all night by bus from Bogotá and arrived that morning. He went to Cali to eat his own shit and then returned to Bogotá. I’ve always said, if that’s not art, nothing is. Aside from the metaphor, which can be read in several different ways, was the conviction and motivation behind this important gesture.” See Mejía, “Welcome,” in Helena Producciones, *Festival de Performance de Cali-Colombia*, 166, my translation.

8. With the exception of a four-year lag precipitated by a failed experiment with private funding, the festival has for the most part taken place annually or biennially. Since 2006 it has received financial and organizational support from major international foundations as well as the Colombian cultural ministry.

9. The protestors, a group of students from the Universidad del Valle, burned a small portion of the flag. They then stormed into the artist’s talk carrying a Colombian flag, although they neither identified themselves nor made any statements. Sierra cancelled his talk in frustration.

10. Although the legitimacy of these archaic and expensive presentations has been debated for years, they have nevertheless persisted, to the detriment of perhaps more efficient and productive uses of the state’s uneven allocation of cultural funding.

11. Both spaces were headed up by artist Jaime Iregui, who went on to create *esferapública*, an online forum that has greatly contributed to the development of institutional critique in Colombia.

12. Víctor Albarracín, “Antagonismo y fracaso: la historia de un espacio de artistas en Bogotá,” in Ministerio de Cultura, Universidad de los Andes, *Ensayos sobre arte contemporáneo en Colombia, 2008–2009* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2009), 90, my translation. Albarracín is one of the founders of El Bodegón.

13. Espacio La Rebeca was a project I conceived for Bogotá following my tenure as director of La Panadería in Mexico City from 2000 to 2001. It was based on an academic model of institutional critique as well as my interest in artist-run spaces in Switzerland and Canada. La Rebeca received a three-year grant for programming support from The Daros Foundation. The Foundation later provided the funding used to purchase the house where Lugar a Dudas is based.

14. Although Lugar a Dudas does not translate easily into English, *A Place to Doubt* is a good approximation.

15. Muñoz has stated that an important motive behind opening Lugar a Dudas was to resist his tendency to isolate himself in his studio. See Humberto Junca, “Sin Lugar a Dudas,” *Arcadia* 17 (February 2007): 13.