

Los imperativos de la liberación

By Gita Hashemi

This is my third time participating at InteractivA, initially invited as an artist, and, since 2005, also as a guest curator. I can't boast of festival hopping, biennial touring or cosmopolitan art marketing. What I can claim are sensitive roots and tendrils that, displaced from their soil of origin, eagerly spread in multiple directions in search of solid earth, murmuring undercurrents, towering trees and expansive skies. To'ho/Merida: Roots and tendrils. Over its last four incarnations, Arte Nuevo InteractivA has become an important site for experimentation and conversation, a post/colonial locale aware of its historical and geopolitical complexities and unwilling to cover them up with sleek displays and pretentious parties, a communal feast rather than a festival of spectacles. To'Ho/Mérida: Saludos por tercera ocasión.

For those of us involved in emancipatory projects, it is imperative that we politicize and ground representation and discourse in materiality and embodiment. In other words, we must interrogate geo-political and socio-economic location(s), relations, identity(ies) and identification(s) as foundational to our analysis of the conditions and relations of representation, of discursive privilege or lack thereof. The corporatization of knowledge as property and emergence of culture and art as capital and commodity have tangibly linked intellectual, cultural and artistic work to material relations and indisputably established them as sites for the re/production of socio-economic privilege, thus casting intellectuals/artists/culture workers as shareholders or labourers. We must become freedom fighters.

In the wake for/of “modernity” — with its legacies of enlightenment rationality, colonial/expansionist wars, settler and puppet states, forced modernization, environmental and humanitarian disasters, corporate capitalism and global fascism — we must go beyond the production and promotion of critical theory as the primary tasks of intellectual practice. We must simultaneously construct (semi-) autonomous spaces where racialized, marginalized and/or occupied individuals and communities in the “global north” and “global south” may establish their own narratives of self and resistance. Sites where the ethos of experimentation may challenge fixed and totalizing paradigms, where self-representation and auto-ethnography become tactical weapons in the media wars and dissent may find expression as aesthetic practice and vice versa. From these locations it becomes possible to imagine, embody, deploy and sustain effective alternative ethics in opposition to the global domination of white capitalist patriarchy's logic and relations.

It is imperative that we reject not only singular meta-narratives of collectivity and capitalist modernity but also the dictates of the exceedingly prolific Discourse Industry that spans the spheres of the academy, the media and the arts. While producing many mini-meta-narratives — fragmented, customizable and niche-marketed — Discourse Industry functions with one hand to dematerialize and disembodify representation, to homogenize and globalize it, and, with the other hand, to profit materially from the commodification of representation, from the very material conditions and relations of representation and its processes and products. In the “post-colonial,” “post-material,” “post-feminist” world — the spanking “new” order of things, we must interrogate the political economy and institutional/structural cartography of discursive production — representation — as highly relevant to our assessment of a discourse's relevance to our work. We must concern ourselves with accounting for the inequitable material conditions

and relations that sustain and are sustained by the capitalist intellectual/cultural tourist industry at the cost of those whose lands, resources, spaces, images, stories, hospitalities we pass through, appropriate, occupy and benefit from. Where representation and discourse are no longer bound to fixed location, gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality and stories/representations and bodies/social nodes can, like capital, expand and roam nomadically in many places, touch many bodies, assume and perform many identities and appropriate many locations, cultures and stories, we must insist on grounding and embodying discourse.

We must ask, “who is speaking?” and “for whom?” “From which location?” “What are the intentions of the speaker?” and “what are the effects of the speech?” “Who profits and who benefits and in what ways?” “Who remains silent?” and “who pays for the speech?” “What kind of ethics does the speech embody?” and “what are its material conditions and modes of production?”

We must ask these questions not just because they can be answered with a concreteness and certainty that is crucial to an analysis of the discourse, but, more importantly, because asking them sends ripples through smooth domestic and international intellectual/industrial multiculturalism by making real conflicts visible. These are real differences in positions, powers, aspirations and agendas that implicate the interrogator and the interrogated in conflict, and, therefore, ground representation and discourse as material and embodied. These questions and the act of questioning are rightly interpreted as antagonistic and oppositional, but to the extent that our work is about liberation as an ongoing process of self-actualization and communal empowerment we must risk being fugitives in occupied lands. To’ho/Mérida, Fuitive Territories: Regreso con/para la Auto_liberación.

AutoLiberación is a selection rather than a commissioned collection, in other words the program is comprised of videos that have emerged independent of the curatorial process and in response to their makers’ own needs and priorities. The program was inspired by many conversations and encounters in the context of local and transnational independent community, artist and activist networks where I and the participants function as nodes, locations, conduits and facilitators (also as places, memories, stories, processes and agents). Generally, in these networks relations of friendship and solidarity (rather than those of capital) animate and facilitate both artistic production and curatorial articulation.

In AutoLiberación, representational practice is understood as embodied and material, as representation *of* and *by*. The works in this program do not share fixed locations, identities or political strategies. The conceptual space and political imperative of the program — self liberation(s) — are, rather, an articulation of a shared desire; a space where that desire can be expressed with the specificity and clarity of acts of self-representation and where mutual recognition and solidarity can be collaboratively explored, grounded and built upon.

Notions of self-representation, collaboration and alternative networks — the heart of both friendship and solidarity — also animate the very production and dissemination of the videos included in AutoLiberación. Their makers — functioning in diverse milieus variously as artists, activists, cultural workers, community mobilizers, poets, chroniclers, journalists, broadcasters — build on the use value of creative practice and media production as communal resources within self-directed micro-economies as alternatives to dominant art/intellectual/political/economic systems. Where white patriarchal capitalism limits the notion of democracy to depoliticized individual (self-) expression, the works in this program employ the tools of expression in the service of challenging, subverting and changing dominant relations of power.

These aesthetic values are observable in their highly collaborative relations and processes of production, diverse forms of direct community engagement in the projects, their independent dissemination, and/or in the construction of visual and narrative approaches that question and resist easy-to-digest, sleek, stereotypical and simplistic forms of the art/media/entertainment industries. In constructing these highly politicized aesthetics, these works resist/counter the aestheticized politics that characterize fascism and neoliberalism's masquerade as "democracy," "free speech" and "progress" as mediated by technologically re/produced spectacles.

The work of these artists and collectives thus also lays direct claim to theorizing and building upon the use value of information and communication technologies (media) in the ways they employ both production and dissemination technologies as public resource and social space rather than private property, and to the extent they assume these technologies in the service of collective aspirations rather than corporate profit making. Such withdrawal of the processes of representation from the sphere of capitalist relations not only functions toward constructing autonomous public media but also facilitates the formulation and spread of revolutionary demands that would, without some form of autonomous media, remain isolated and fragmented or else get co-opted and emptied of their transformative potentials. In the works in AutoLiberación, politically purposeful communication is the answer to depoliticized self-expression mediated by consumer technology.

Encuadres Dis/Continuos Dis/Continuous Frames

AutoLiberación_1 explores the dis/continuities of the present moment in relation to gender, race and class as key socio-economic determinants. Viscerally foregrounding the position and mediation of the camera (frame), the apparatus of the disciplinary gaze, Julieta Maria's *Unknown* is a poetic reflection on the subtleties of being a woman; not the seductive sleek-haired fashionista that gazes back submissively from the cover of this magazine and the poster for that product, but a brown woman with thick eyebrows and bushy hair, wearing socks and going in circles in a small enclosed domestic space at an unknown (any) location. *Unknown* asks unsettling questions but offers no specific answers except to insist on the act of questioning as the foundation of knowledge of the self in relation to the world.

In *Juarez*, Alex Flores and Lorena Vassolo set out in search of answers in the disappearance of over 70 women and murders of nearly 400 in Ciudad Juárez since 1993. Directly involving some of the women's families, local activists, journalists, whistle-blowers and artists who refuse to let the systemic nature of the murders and disappearances be swept under the cheap carpet of inadequate and rigged criminal investigations, the videomakers and their subjects collaborate in mapping the femicide in Ciudad Juárez against the background of the local and global politics and economics of maquiladora and sex/pornography industries, in the context of Mexico's domestic politics pre- and post-NAFTA, and as a continuation of misogyny as patriarchy's strategy for domination. Rather than posing as a detached, dispassionate, didactic expose (dominant style of documentary production) or as a sensationalist pornographic spectacle (customary mode of journalistic production), *Juarez* functions as a feminist locus for rituals of empowerment and self-narration where stories of women's resistance are prioritized and the production of the video itself becomes an occasion for community dialogue and participation in acts of solidarity and self-liberation.

Retratos de lo Des/Conocido Portraits of the Un/Known

Can (self)portrait be a revolutionary genre? Yes, and in that it is not simply limited to recording the existence of verifiable or even credible revolutionary figureheads, as is the tradition in patriarchal political left so saturated with stock iconographies and repetitious biographies (in effect part and parcel of mass produced ideologies). In *AutoLiberación_2*, (self-) portrait is seen as a revolutionary practice to the extent that the portrait is a space where specific collective memories, histories and lived realities are not only recorded for posterity but have to be reckoned with ethically and politically. In *You Are Evil*, Louis Taylor's direct poetic address to the viewer, in present tense, paints a portrait of the other which, through a visually potent reversal of the frame, also functions as a portrait of himself wrestling with questions of ethical responsibility and social accountability in a world dominated by the geopolitics of the so-called "war on terror." Julieta Maria's *Findings* weaves photographic portraits of her own family into a visual poem that traces their migration from Palestine to Columbia. Here the frame is temporally and spatially in motion thus the (self-) portrait doubles as a historical and geopolitical landscape.

The selection of 9 videos from Balata Film Collective's corpus included here in their totality stands as a highly detailed (self-) portrait that extends well outside its frame to implicate viewers in the politics of framing. Based in one of the largest refugee camps in Palestine, the collective, mostly youth, was formed through the initiative of Ruby Said, a local activist who, while hosting an international solidarity activist who was video documenting Israeli attacks on the camp during the beginning of the Second Intifada, decided to learn to use the camera herself to narrate the lives and struggles in the camp from an insider's perspective.¹ In Balata Film Collective's work, auto-ethnography is an ethical imperative and a political strategy. For Balata residents, a community of refugees displaced in the Nakbe (1948 catastrophic occupation of Palestine by Zionists that formed the settler state of Israel), the violence of Israeli occupation is not limited to its immediately visible practices (images that most of us are by now familiar with) such as the spectacular displays of tanks and armed-to-the-teeth soldiers rolling onto their streets and into their homes, nor is resistance limited to suicide bombings and guerilla brigades, though these are present and ongoing in their lives. By focusing on other everyday realities — the community's celebration of the coming home of a father after 20 years in an Israeli prison, the challenge of making a traditional meal with a vegetable that grows on Israeli occupied lands and the debates amongst Balata residents about the elections held under occupation — the Balata Film Collective's videos recast occupation and resistance as historical continuities not just expedient political urgencies. Working with borrowed and second-hand equipment and distributing their videos for free on the Internet, the Collective is itself a resounding act of self-liberation and a portrait of a people unwilling to submit.

Calle del Alma Soul Street

AutoLiberación_3 is a walk down the streets in the global north, Colonial Canada. Not the aimless stroll of the flaneur nor a *dérive*, this walk is a purposeful journey from the physical land of the indigenous peoples of Canada through the settler suburbs to the center of a colonial metropolis. Here urbanism attempts to contain and mask the conflicts inherent in the daily workings of a settler state and its population, and continuously fails. The purpose of this walk is not simply to see or see with new eyes — or even to experience — this place and its inhabitants — the voyeuristic journey of a tourist — but to urge all of us who live in las Americas to rethink our relationship to the lands on which we live and to one another. "I wish they would take a walk down the streets of our souls," says Doreen Silversmith, a Six Nations activist from Kanonhstaton, in Audrey Huntley and Sarah Kapoor's *Letters from Caledonia/Six Nations*, a

video reportage from the site of a land reclamation struggle staged by Haudenosaunee people against urban development in Caledonia, a suburb of Toronto, illegally creeping in and occupying their lands. For indigenous warriors and resisters, the imperative of fighting back arises not only from a question of ownership of the land — which communally belongs to the Six Nations — but from the necessity of protecting the land against the environmental exploitation that accompanies unleashed urban developments, their way of life and their communities from the hegemonic white settler state. Huntley and Kapoor take standard journalism to a different plane when they use video as a productive social space where people who are directly involved in conflict can enter into a mediated dialogue. *The Good Old Boys*, by Vicky Moufawad-Paul, is a highly animated road trip inside/outside the barricades put up by the Mohawk community of Kanehsatake in resistance to the corrupt local government imposed on them by the Canadian state. In addition to documenting a moment of victory by the warriors (however exhilarating and ephemeral), this piece is significant in that it also functions as an offering, in the spirit of transnational solidarity, from a Palestinian artist/activist to Mohawk activists. This is indicative of the ways in which resistance to (neo)colonialism is being defined as a global project through specific localized actions.

Back in the heart of Toronto, the youth of Regent Park TV take us for a walk in their culturally diverse neighbourhood, Canada's largest and oldest public housing complex, as it is about to be transformed by the city's top-down 'revitalization' plan. In decisive steps, this selection of 9 videos from RPTV's ongoing broadcast goes from a portrait of a neighbourhood undergoing change driven by capitalist interests to a portrait of the global village where uncritical consumption rides on child labour exploitation. In that short distance, the videomakers raise crucial questions in relation to considerations of social good. Punctuated with the adventures of BikeMan in his confrontation with the Striped Bandit in the world's capital of bike theft, these videos offer a walk down the streets of the inner city's soul, generously brought to us by the streetwise and inquisitive youth of RPTV. As in the work of Balata Film Collective, beyond the subject matter and content, RPTV's significance is in the way it functions as a locus for transforming consciousness as an act of self-liberation.

For me, InteractivA has become a space for praxis: a process through which theory is embodied, enacted and practiced. This curatorial effort conceptually and methodologically echoes InteractivA in using alternative networks and relations and in positing curation as a work of mediation rather than hierarchical production. In its initial phases, this program was titled "Land Matters," to point to the location and materiality of representational practice as a foundation of political and artistic discourse. But that would have been stating the obvious. The political imperative of this program — its title — emerged from a more active interpretation of the social purpose and intentions of the projects represented here. Land matters? Of course it does. And, from Palestine to Six Nations to Juarez, people stand up and fight for their land against (neo)colonialism and neo-liberalism, against military and corporate occupation, against settlement mentality and gentrification. These are imperatives of self-liberation as a project of reconstituting a sustainable and equitable collectivity. To'ho/Mérida: Estos moviminetos irregulares los traigo como recuerdos de la solidaridad.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Zainab Amadahy, Adonis Huggins and Vicky-Moufawad-Paul for their valuable suggestions towards some of the projects included here, to all the participating artists for allowing me to include their work in this program, to Izida Zorde for her editorial assistance, and, as always, to Raul Moarquench Ferrera-Balanquet for his untiring

visionary work at InteractivA and for inviting me to join in that, and to the community of artists and volunteers in Merida for their crucial work in staging the biennial and for their gracious hospitality.

¹ V. Moufawad-Paul. “Resistance, Collective Memory and Creating Decolonized Territory.” Fuse Magazine, v. 29, no. 4 (2006)