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LUIS CARLOS TOVAR PALONEGRO

04.09 – 15.12.2024

Palonegro is the most recent project by Colombian artist Luis Carlos Tovar, presented for the first time in this exhibition. It is the fruit of several years of research between Colombia, Switzerland and France, both in the field and in numerous private and public archives of the three countries. *Palonegro* investigates a specific chapter in the history of violence in Colombia, the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902), the country's ninth and most important civil war. The bloody Battle of Palonegro (11-26 May 1900) was the most important battle of the conflict. Beyond this particular chapter of Colombian history, the artist's research project explores the writing of history, its memorialisation and transmission, and possible processes for healing individual and collective traumas linked to political violence. He pays close attention to the narratives left out of official national histories and the multiple voices that shape them. He composes new interpretations by assembling excerpts from archives, documents and objects from different sources. His experimental use of photography, in which images are often cropped and evanescent, evokes the gradual erasure of memory. *Palonegro* also highlights the important and little-known links between Switzerland and Colombia in the creation and preservation of this country's history.

"In my latest projects I have developed an artistic practice around archives on Colombia's dramatic and violent history. Through personal and public archives, I am interested in the notion of postmemory as an exercise of imaginative reconstruction and creative involvement. For this new project my aim was to investigate the different forms of representation of violence in Colombia and the roots of our systemic violence nowadays through different typologies of documentary photography, maps and documents from five specific events during the 19th and 20th century.

My investigations led me to decommissioned files from the Colombian Ministry of War of 21 military service records of the Colombian Republic, used by former soldiers to claim their pensions after participating in the ninth civil war called the Thousand Days' War. I have also explored the Photothèque of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, and The Red Cross Museum in Geneva, which both contain significant but under-researched visual

material related to the Colombian war history and to the humanitarian work conducted in the country, inspired by the organisation throughout the 19th and 20th century. The humanitarian aid of the Red Cross in Colombia began in the midst of the battle of Palonegro, during the Thousand Days War. Since then, the Red Cross has been an active witness in the history of violence in Colombia. At the Library of Geneva, I had the opportunity to photograph the Colombian Maps collection and in particular *La Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* by the anarchist cartographer Élisée Reclus (Catalogue Perron-XLI Amérique du Sud), with the purpose to make it accessible to a broader audience, including Colombian institutions and public. The body of work of this exhibition is also based on field work conducted in the Canyon of Chicamocha (Colombia), searching for the remains of this bloody civil war.

The goal of this research is the revision and resignification of these photographic archives, which I consider as bodies (*corpus*) to be healed. Approaching them in this manner allowed me to envisage by extension the possibility of healing individual and collective memory from the traumas and wounds of Colombian history. The process and result of this research could be characterised by the proverbs *Homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to man) and *Homo homini deus* (man is a god for man). In those inventories, I have activated a performative visual essay using the recourse and mechanisms of appropriation through collage, super 8 film and photoengraving.

Palonegro is an attempt to reclaim and dignify the gesture of healing, while facing the representations of this unresolved war in my country. I wanted to magnify the hands from different contexts to emphasize this performative act. There is reference of a sculpture by Louise Bourgeois called *Give or Take*. The bronze arm has two hands. Each hand has a gesture. The first is open, ready to give or release something. The second hand is a closed fist. This ambivalent attitude could be evidenced in the relationship between the one who represents the suffering of the other and the one who looks, as well as between the one who archives those representations and the one who investigates them."

Luis Carlos Tovar

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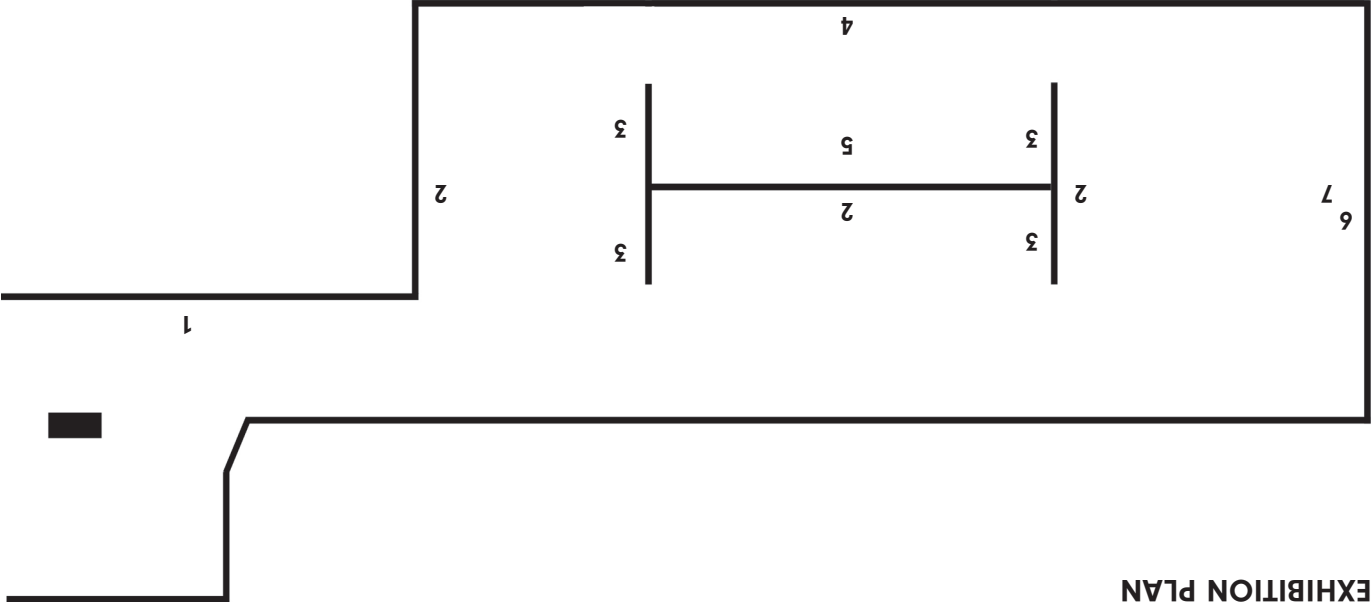


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Andrés Foglia's article 'Palonegro', which describes the project in detail, is available at the front desk.

PROJECTS

1 The construction of Palonegro International Airport started in 1969-1974, with a major earthwork and leveling work, and the transfer of 14 million cubic meters of Henrique Arboleda Cortés, the French newspaper's Le Petit Journal portraying the war as heroic, and a Colombian mural by the painter Luis Alberto Acuña showing on the contrary, the care of wounded soldiers and combining these elements, the artist invites us to rediscover this partially erased history, and he initiates a memorial process aiming to understand the multiple layers of this history.

2 The five metal shelves in the exhibition present documents linked to the Battle of Palonegro and produced between 1900 and 1910. They include pictures from a photographic archive of the conflict reproduced in photoengraving on aluminum plates. We can discern images of the battlefield, of barricades and of one of the improvised hospitals run by the Dominican Sisters of Charity of the Presentation, where the wounded Liberal soldiers were treated, and which were nicknamed *Casas de Sangre* [houses of blood]. The first image in the series is the very first photographic representation of a battle in Colombia, with barely recognizable explosions of the cannons (in white). Objects collected by the artist in the Palonegro region – such as a stone from the ruins of an improvised hospital, a bullet extracted from the walling wall at the Chicamocha canyon, or a bowling game called *Palo Negro* or *Bolo crollo* – are as may

3 These images were printed through an experimental photoengraving process on tarlatan, a very light fabric used notably for dresses and the restoration of historical paintings or documents. They show close-ups of hands, questioning their social role, their ritual dimension and their relationship to care and power. Alongside statues of Catholic saints and politicians, the hands are primarily those of Red Cross nuns and nurses, caring for the wounded after battles or natural disasters at different times, and found by the artist in the archive of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva and at the Cruz Roja de Colombia. This work is part of the artist's subtractive approach, which consists of making images transparent or evanescent. While this process evokes the gradual erasure of memory over time, it also proposes new possible interpretations by bringing these images together, and inscribes them in the present. By cropping images and printing them in very delicate shades of grey, softening the details, the artist avoids re-enacting the violence, and proposes instead a gesture of care.

4 A confluence of circumstances enabled the artist to acquire a deaccessioned archive containing the files of soldiers who fought in the Thousand Days' War

and other Colombian conflicts. These service records were used to support pension claims by soldiers who had fought on the side of the Colombian government. This historical testimony, which formed part of the archives of the Ministry of War, is presented here in relation to archival images and photographs taken by the artist in the Palonegro region. These take a variety of approaches to the battle: portraits of the region's current inhabitants and landscapes featuring occasional vestiges of the war, old Palonegro Battle maps, historical archives of the nuns caring for the wounded soldiers, and objects collected by the artist. They include an ossuary made from the skulls of fallen soldiers of Palonegro, photographed in 1901 by Colombia's first female photographer, Amalia Ramírez de Ordoñez, and the ruins of the first hospital set up by the Red Cross in the early 20th century.

BIOGRAPHY

Luis Carlos Tovar (*1979) is a Colombian visual artist, who circulates between France and Colombia. He studied architecture and art at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, the Universidad de los Andes, also in Bogotá, and photography at the EFTT in Madrid.

His main research interests are discontinuous geographies and the notion of post-memory in contemporary art. Particularly interested in post-photography and archives, he explores the processes of creating otherness and the way in which personal memories shape collective memory. His work incorporates a range of media, including photography, film and video, printmaking, collage and installation. He favours long-term projects involving in-depth historical research.

5 Reproduction of the back of three maps of Colombia by Elisee Reclus (1830-1905), next to the volume 18 of his *Nouvelle géographie universelle*, dedicated to the Andean regions of South America (1893). This French geographer and anarchist, a precursor of social geography and ecology, visited Colombia several times. These maps, preserved in the cartographic collections of the Library of Geneva, were repaired using fragments of newspapers (possibly by Reclus himself), producing a symbolic counter-narrative. For example, we can detect words and shapes that are in dialogue with the project *Palonegro*. This counter-atlas, to use the artist's terminology, constitutes a gesture of care, a process of reparation, which also symbolises the artist's desire to question the dominant, and particularly colonial, discourse. The artist has chosen to present alongside them a photograph of girls learning the geography of Colombia in 1937, kept at the General Archive of the Nation in Colombia.

6 Developed by the German surgeon Friedrich Esmarich in 1869, the triangular bandage is a multifunctional first-aid tool, used mainly in military applications, listed and printed directly on the fabric. The monochrome triangle painted on the exhibition wall references this method of treatment. It was used at the Battle of Palonegro by the Dominican Sisters of Charity of the Presentation, imported by five nuns who had learned its use at the Battle of Solferino. This French female congregation set up hospitals, asylums, orphanages, schools and homes for the elderly with the help of liberal Colombian doctors. Affiliated to the Red Cross, these nuns were the first to treat the wounded on both sides of the conflict in Colombia.

7 This video essay confronts different sources relating to the history of Palonegro. Maps from the Library of Geneva, images of the Palonegro airport and the triangular bandage handled by a Red Cross archivist in Geneva alternate with negative images of a forest fire. These were shot in Super 8 by the artist at the very location of the photograph taken 125 years earlier, which faces the video installation in the exhibition. The text is an extract from the poem *Silence* by American author Edgar Lee Master, in which the

and photography techniques.

His work has been widely exhibited internationally for the past fifteen years. His film *Undo* was shown at MACRO in Rome and won the ILLA prize (2015-2016). His project *Cartographies of Escape* (2015-2018), dedicated to freedom of movement, traces the exile routes of African migrants in Europe. It was selected for the photographic residences at the Musée du Quai Branly (2018) and was published by La Fabrica in 2017. He has exhibited in Madrid at the Museo de Arte Alcobendas (2018) and in Paris at the Cité Internationale des Arts (2019). He won the PhotoEspaña Discovery Award in 2017 and was nominated for the Prix Pictet in 2019. He won the prestigious Prix Elysée in 2019, which led to the publication *Jardin de mi Padre*, co-published by PhotElysée and RM, which was shortlisted for the major Paris Photo Aperture Foundation Photobook of the Year Award in 2020. In residence at the Fininco Foundation (Romainville, France) from 2020 to 2021, he continued his exploration of post-photography with the series *Frictions*, for which he enlarged press microfilms on a large scale in an immersive installation produced using experimental lithography and photography techniques.