



Shouting in the Plaza

Isabel Vericat

As time passes since my return from Tijuana, things become more and more unreal. I no longer know what country I am writing from. I only know that I am writing from NAR ([Our Apparent Rendition](#)), our shared virtual courtyard, the public plaza we have built together so as not to remain trapped in the limbo of silence and in the passive acceptance of a hyper-reality that is killing us. As in states of traumatic shock, we have to talk, to shake ourselves, to talk without ceasing so as not to fall into a lethal coma.

After we've seen those 35 tortured bodies thrown in the streets, in full public view, in Boca del Rio, will we see signs that warn: "Do Not Throw the Dead in the Streets, Even When they are Criminals"? Will it do just to kill them, as the governor of Veracruz, who defends "these types of executions" (of those criminals on the other side), declares?

Will the debate about whether Twitter is a private or public space with total or limited freedom of expression continue while they hang the bodies of a man and a woman—"tweeters" both—bound hand and foot from a highway overpass in Tamaulipas?

Will we have to continue to learn from the foreign press, while the regional and even national media remain silent, of the perverse (I can't find another word, I don't know if it exists) decapitation, dismemberment, and exhibition of the body of a brave 39-year-old journalist, Elizabeth Macías, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Nueva Hora*? Her assassins

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placed her head next to the monument to Columbus in Nuevo Laredo, surrounded by computer keyboards, cables, a mouse, as a condemnation of communication through social networks.

Is it not also “natural” that the front page of some newspapers includes news of the lynching of a criminal, with a photograph of the community that lynched him standing around the corpse? Justice by one’s own hand: there is no longer another way.

All of this and more happened during the few days that we went to Tijuana, invited by the Festival Interzona (the Inter-zone Festival), now in its fifth year. We had left behind one country to go to a city on the border with another. Actually, it was more like a Third Country—neither the US nor Mexico—that, for all its fame as the capital of narcoculture, is now in its post-narco phase (if such a thing exists) because it is under the control of one of the drug lords, Chapo Guzmán (*Basaglia dixit*).

Meanwhile, the news:

Chapo Guzmán’s wife gives birth to twins in a Los Angeles hospital. “His wife, Emma Coronel, was not detained, as there are no charges against her,” points out a Los Angeles newspaper.

Hyper-realism (crude and raw, with all its hairs and blemishes), realism, infra-realism. Surrealism no longer serves to explain us as a country.

How can we understand these events, all the things that are happening, reaching beyond the surface of things? Into what languages should we translate the images, forms, actions?

These are all questions. We are looking for answers.

What else can we talk about?

We are in the Casa del Túnel, a building shaped like the prow of a ship that pushes toward the country next door, which is walled in by wire and the metal debris of airplanes and other weapons of its recent and interminable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The tunnel crossed under the border: it was 50 meters long and came out on the other side, opening onto the parking lot of a store where no one noticed when vehicles stopped to pick up merchandise (drugs, people, objects). Until someone saw something, and the house was raided. The tunnel was sealed with cement and the interior of the house was turned into a space for national and bi-national gatherings; it became the headquarters for the Festival Interzona, which for five years has enriched the life of this city.

EMISFÉRICA



Isabel Vericat

In the terrace on the upper level, on the deck, there is a jazz concert featuring two outstanding female vocalists. It's the beat and ambience, the warmth of nocturnal well-being. On the first floor, on two plush sofas, we present NAR to some 30 interested and interesting attendees—they are generally older men and women. The rather private and personal atmosphere sets the tone. To begin, and in order to avoid the same old story of “Calderón’s war on the narco,” we look back to a few years before the birth of NAR (2008), when two woman artists expressed in their works and performances the long history of femicide and impunity that we bear on our backs. The speaking cure, the art cure. And then even further back, to when it was not Tijuana but Ciudad Juárez that Charles Bowden denominated the laboratory of the future.

“What else can we talk about?” answered the artist Teresa Margolles to the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina; this was the title she later used for the performance she presented at the Venice Biennale. Here, she “cleaned” the empty rooms of a palace with a mixture of water and the blood of victims of organized crime.

Then came Rosa María Robles’s *The Red Carpet (La alfombra roja)*, made with the blankets of the “*encobijados*” (murder victims found wrapped in blankets), which she presented in a gallery in Culiacán. The blankets came from the depot of the attorney general’s office; they were legal evidence and Robles had to return them due to the scandal it caused. She bought other blankets and dyed them with her own blood. “That is how she achieved an indelible metaphor,” writes Juan Villoro in his *crónica, Our Blood (Nuestra Sangre)*. “For some time we resorted to a protective distraction, thinking that the narcos killed amongst themselves; now we know that the blood can be ours.”

A laboratory is a Reality in which you experiment or elaborate something. To be witness to others means to put those victims at the center and abandon all sense of innocence or good conscience. It also means bringing our own pain into play.

EMISFÉRICA



Isabel Vericat

We speak of the transition from indifference to the expression of collective resistance symbolized by the evolution of our blog into an Internet portal. We project our website and detail some of our special projects. Some of the women are interested in speaking about the femicides; another attendee is interested in the absence of the rule of law. In the exchange, several terms that allude to the general feeling of insecurity begin to surface: “failed state,” “weak,” “fragmented,” “parallel state.” Some members of our audience are interested in NAR’s proposal of a broad and horizontal dialogue and exchange between citizens, and not a vertical one with the government or the authorities. We speak of the creation of a rich network of solidarity, creativity, and resistance: of citizenship. At the end, someone in the first row asks what he can do to help a friend he encountered recently in the street, in a dreadful state, who told him that his brother had disappeared, that one day he did not return home. He would like to help this friend, because each day he looks thinner and more anguished. But we don’t know how, we tell him. The disappearances now become the primary topic of concern and debate.

Outside, on the sidewalk of the Casa del Túnel, like some sort of sculptural installation, lies the bullet-riddled chassis of a 1950s car, painted white—as if Bonnie and Clyde had left it behind as they fled. Are we in their territory? The power that keeps this city in line is invisible.

“That is why the current indignation against the narco-war (*narcoguerra*) does not have the same strength in Tijuana, which, besides, hasn’t yet gotten over its popular love for the narco, *in all social classes*—from businessmen to thugs,” writes Heriberto Yepez on his blog, *Hache*. He is one of the best-known thinkers of frontier identity and of the imaginary of Tijuana as a city, *crónica*, and way of life. Yepez adds:

What comes next for Mexico? All the major cities will be Juarez. And then they will be Tijuana. The narco-war will lower in intensity. It will move to the background. And, at some point, when it seems that the narco is going away, consumers, employees and fans will call, in the name of the whole country, for the narco to *never* go away.

EMISFÉRICA

These are the dispiriting predictions of some experts: the film-like romanticizing of violence.

While we are enjoying the music and the singer's voice on the terrace, I receive a rather hazardous text message on my phone from a lawyer friend who works for the project Iniciativa Frontera Norte (the Northern Border Initiative): "Hello Isabel, we have an emergency on the line. I am still here. I'm sorry. I will call you later. A kiss." The next day we read in the paper the news of an emigrant shot by a policeman from his station at the border crossing.

During those days we go around all of Tijuana with two friends, Meritxell and Nancy—a lawyer and a philosophy student. They are experts, especially Meritxell, in the Tijuana of the past: when the city was a musical Mecca with Santana, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and other greats lighting up the dive bars through the night.



Isabel Vericat

Now, they tell us, the drugs are more and more adulterated. And the otherworldly population of those that don't manage to cross to the other side, or of the unemployed, the addicts, all of them perpetually hungry, without roofs over their heads, making their homes in El Bordo—the almost-Pharaonic canalization of the little Tijuana river. It is their home, their meeting place, their place of survival. All of this unfolding in the full public view of cars and passersby, to their complete indifference. Our friends give the women new needles, in collaboration with welfare organizations on the other side, which the women immediately use to inject themselves. But this is the only way they can prevent, or at least avoid, the transmission of HIV.

We have the privilege of visiting a sort of oasis or refuge, the Clínica de la Conducta. Meritxell's father, a charming psychiatrist (a mix that is hard to find), has dedicated the last 20 years to the rehabilitation of heroine addicts via a permanent treatment with methadone. Our friends are working with a group of 17 women— "the resistant ones" — all of them victims of trafficking at some point in their lives, the majority having left their homes after suffering sexual abuse by family members. All of them have also had to mourn the femicide of a friend, a coworker, a needle-buddy. Almost all of them are migrant women. "Here in Tijuana, if a young woman is

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killed and if she's dressed a certain way, immediately the authorities say that it was a narco-execution." Further comments are unnecessary.

On First Street, which is active 24 hours a day, there is what appears to be the calmest and most explicit location of the sexual market. Girls and more girls—many look like minors—attractive, wearing make up, leaning against the walls on the sidewalk waiting for a client. Bright neon street signs, large and small half-empty stores with their doors ajar. The ancestral exchange of sex for money, unfolding, uninterrupted, throughout the day. We can only hope that it is voluntary rather than coerced.

Orson Welles's film *Touch of Evil*, starring Janet Leigh and Charlton Heston, comes to mind. In that Tijuana, the heroic Mexican policeman (Heston) confronts the corrupt American (Welles)—the casting would be absurd today. And then there is the mysterious and enigmatic gypsy (Marlene Dietrich) who predicts the worst fate for her ex-lover (Welles). What would the clairvoyant of the present predict?

The Tijuana of today has transformed its own inhabitants: the drug Mecca, with the most links to the United States, the one that has been pierced by the most bullets. The aesthetization of violence transformed in films and novels.

But it is not so in *Miss Bala*, the recent film by the Mexican director Gerardo Naranjo, also set in Tijuana. It is an elaboration of reality as *non-fiction*, of the normality of horror, and of fear from the subjective and personal point of view of the victims. Without exaggeration (it is not necessary), it takes as its point of departure an actual event that took place two or three years ago: a beauty queen in Culiacán was caught with a drug boss.

On the return flight from the western tip of the northern border over the Pacific to the center of the country on the plateau, we fly over a roof of compact clouds, an initial sky that separates us from the hyper-reality of that spectacle of cannibal violence on the ground.

In the clarity of that second blue sky to which we have ascended, the dense and astonishing shapes of the clouds—more beautiful even than those painted by Georgia O'Keeffe practically below the same sky, in New Mexico—cast their shadows over the reality of the first.

And it is only now, looking up at that limitless, cosmic blue, that I wonder about the kingdom of heaven and who would go there. Probably Solalinde, everyone who lives in El Bordo, the gratuitous victims (which is all of them) of this barbaric massacre, of this financial system that sucks the blood from all of us, from the immense majority of humanity except those who have it all. Our rotten world is that unequal.

Isabel Vericat

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EMISFÉRICA

Post Script: This attempt to describe a reality that is inexpressible as a whole, and only possible to apprehend in fragments, implies a solid grasp of the territories into which our country has been fragmented by narco-trafficking. Not of narco-politics but of a *necro*-politics that exercises its right over the life and death of its subjects. In this daily hyper-reality, death is the message—in mutilated bodies and “narco-blankets”—and our lives are increasingly more precarious and bare.

The illegal economy of trafficking feeds on arms and people —not only on “narcotics”— and at the same time feeds a “legal” economy that could not subsist without it. Corruption and impunity maintain and legitimate the necro-powers in play.

Translated by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra

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