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Absent Causes, or el secreto a voces

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“Don’t worry,” assuaged the gracious facilitator at the Medellín meeting. I had voiced concern about the absence of art from our discussion, though it was patently present in the examples of progress reported during the U.N. Safer Cities summit on violence prevention among youth at risk. “Tomorrow,” my accommodating host continued, “we will spend the entire day with local youth leaders, and you’ll see that all of them are artists.” My worry deepened, of course, because the overwhelming evidence of creative practices that channel unruliness into admirable products and performances had not made an impression on the experts who came to discuss violence prevention for youth at risk. Why would more evidence change the paradigm of deliberation, if relevant data does not get through the filters of “scientific research?” Pragmatists know that empiricism is an illusion, because real hard facts do not exist unless we notice them, and noticing depends on culturally constructed expectations.¹ All seventeen of the international experts who gathered in September 2008 to consider the best practices and good bets for future policy avoided any mention of the arts, as if ludic and unconventional expression were only lite fare, unworthy of weighty consideration. Maybe art lacks glamour or magic for the languages of social development. Is disenchantment a kind of perverse enchantment for the discourses of social science that posit a disenchanted world? Or maybe art annoyingly competes with social scientific agendas, like homeopathic cures that professional doctors prefer to ignore when home remedies challenge hard earned scientific expertise.

In any case, the participating psychologists, political scientists, policy experts, urban planners, lawyers, and international functionaries generally mustered their well-meaning talents and dedication towards reaching useful conclusions from examples and from reflections so that the next steps might follow. Some experts, though, preferred not to rush to conclusions but first to refine our core concepts. What, for example, does youth at risk mean? Does it refer to youth with criminal records? Is it a historically determined reference to the victims of violence? Or, are all youth universally vulnerable

to violence in our currently unsafe cities? At least one Colombian colleague became impatient with the unproductive pause in policy discussions, alleging in a Wittgensteinian vein, that definitions had to be site specific and that some sites demanded immediate practical responses. Cities like Santiago, Chile, could possibly afford to ponder these questions of focus and semantics, but local levels of violence in Medellín and Bogotá made broad-based interventions urgent.

Meanwhile, around this inner circle of earnest adults sat a few youthful Peace and Reconciliation workers, as well as two—only two—youth leaders: one from Canada and one Colombian, both artists. Except for them, no one mentioned art. Apparently, among the social scientists, urban planners, and even mental health specialists, an unspoken skepticism or allergy to the subject of art turned the topic into an ungainly elephant in the meeting room. But later, in the informal spaces along hallways and at lunch tables participants were happy to harness the benign beast for free rides from one inspiring story to another about how art saved the day inside daily and dire straights of youth at risk.

Medellín was a propitious place to explore civic salvation, as several participants knew when they nominated the city to host the meeting. On uneven terrain that sprawls between mountains, Medellín earned the name *Angosta*, in Héctor Abad's 2003 novel, a title that refers to more than the city's narrow geographical shape. Narrow straights also acknowledge the effect of anguish in the Spanish *Angosta* and refer to the string of tight spots between rich and poor neighborhoods that for a long time formed a festering wound up and down the city's spine. In the Medellín that gained international notoriety throughout the 1980s and 1990s the wound could hardly heal under the constant irritation of drug wars, guerilla wars, and paramilitary counter insurgencies, all of which reached stunning levels of gang violence that kept outsiders out and left many locals quite desperately confined to their own narrow lives. But over the last decade, during two consecutive administrations of Mayor Sergio Fajardo, the ailing city has revived. Some of the city's tight spots on the dividing line between rich and poor have turned into civic hotspots through, for example, a massive construction project of "library-sports complexes" that draw out populations on either side of the divide to learn and to play together. A "Metro-Cable" artery of public transportation promotes circulation in high-wired cabins that look like impeccably elite ski lifts connecting formerly isolated "informal" squatter communities and the city's urban resources in culture, business, and civic engagement. To appreciate the transformation, consider the almost unbelievable reduction of Medellín's homicide rate over the last decade: 92%. This staggering statistic shows an undeniable triumph, but in the context of Colombia it also signals the precariousness of safety when violence lurks everywhere, just waiting to be reignited. As the country continues to generate conflict in explosive networks of armed combatants

and of offers that are difficult to refuse, underemployed sectors of a now practically peaceful city can succumb to the tangle of drugs, guns, and short range strategies for short-lived lives.

The challenge to keep troubled youth out of trouble led Medellín to develop a truly admirable job training and placement program as a necessary complement to successful disarmament, because without jobs, disenfranchised potential victims and former victimizers can hardly hope to stay clear of violence. Only Medellín has shown real success in the national campaign to “re-insert” ex-combatants into civil society and to defend their human rights to provision and protection. The right to remunerated work is central to the city’s innovative programs for re-insertion which include both job training and brokering the rehabilitated new employees for employers who will offer jobs on the condition that the city guarantee the worker’s reliability. Causes for complaint are compensated by the municipal government, though in practice few such claims have marred the mutual relationships of respect and responsibility that the city government has managed to broker between new workers and established employers.

Since most of the victims during Medellín’s violent years had been youths (14–25 years old), and since today’s youth continues to be the population at the greatest risk of renewed violence and of exclusion from legally remunerated labor, the city’s Herculean accomplishments in “Peace and Reconciliation” made it an inspirational site—as I said—for the Safer Cities meeting on crime prevention among young people throughout Latin America. Inspired by the efforts and the effectiveness of the city’s collaboration with youth leaders, I felt moved on the first day to observe, aloud, that it was no coincidence to find that these leaders were artists—specifically rappers. Art, after all, enables the kind of “empowerment” that the experts were prescribing for the population they called “youth at risk.”

Offering sound bites from aesthetic theory, I mentioned that art defamiliarizes the practices and surroundings to the point that we hardly notice any more out of habit. From the most intimate quotidian routines to the most public catastrophes, habit breeds indifference even to danger and to death as we anticipate repetition, and we hardly register repetition as noteworthy. Without art, “life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war . . . And art exists *that one may recover the sensation of life*” (Shklovsky 12). This lesson from Russian formalism bears on both consumers and producers of art. But producers represent a greater good to society because they multiply the instances and therefore the life-affirming effects of art. Artists create the added value of channeling nonconformist energies that might otherwise explode into violence toward productive practices. In any genre, art thrives on contradiction and struggle.² Making something new depends on that struggle, so that creative activities acknowledge the frustrating straight experienced by youth at risk. They also deflect frustration from potentially

damaging responses into aesthetic challenges which sometimes produce beautiful results. In the best cases for society, art can lead to economic and also to civic gains. The double duty of art is captured brilliantly in the slogan for Toronto's "Remix Project" is "Make money. Make Change."

The next day, we did indeed spend our time with youth leaders in the Comuna 13, underneath the cable cars of Medellín's air-lift transportation system. The morning saw us walking up a steep street bordered by probably unauthorized but rather decent construction, when to our surprise and delight the children's walking band broke out into a musical welcome. At the top of the street, on the top of their community center which features clubs in theater, poetry, painting, and instrumental music among other arts often supported by municipal contributions, the youth of Son Batá regaled us with first-rate performances. First there was a hip-hop concert of rap and break-dance, and then a syncopated tangent took us to the traditional rhythms and playful lyrics from the youths' heritage Pacific coastal area of Chocó. It was a general invitation to participate, as chairs piled up alongside the roof-top forum to give visitors and hosts some space to dance together.

Impressed by the multi-arts design of the collective, which engaged all the young people whatever their individual talents and passions, I congratulated the youth leaders for constructing the principle of "multiple intelligences" on the ground. Added to the arts was their entrepreneurial drive to produce, market, and promote the arts. The cluster of activities inspired me to imagine that they could constitute a model "Cartonera Crew" to multiply Cultural Agents' multi-arts literacy program called *La cartonera* (aka Paper Picker Press). With origins in Sarita Cartonera of Lima, Peru, the program is being developed in several countries and at home, for Cultural Agents, in the Boston area. "Would you be interested in adding literature, challenging classics of literature, to your mix, so that all the other arts would interpret the text and thereby teach literacy at a high level through artistic play?" They were in fact interested, and made plans to join a training session the next month in Bogotá. Like the rappers who had spun Shakespeare for performances at the Strand Theater in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, these hip-hop artists already knew how to turn the Pope's sermon, or a historic speech by Gaitán, into rap. One attraction of the "Cartonera Crew," they understood, would be economic solvency for the artists once schools hired the collective to enhance programs of language arts. At present, bands and dancers compete with each other in the limited market of concerts, record sales and T-shirt design. Resources for education might support more artists and mitigate competition. But the main attraction, of course, is the superior education in reading, writing, and critical thinking that the youth leaders could provide to children through the Cartonera.

That afternoon we all reconvened in one of the library-sports complexes that suture the city; it was evidently accessible and familiar to the youth of Comuna 13. This time, a dozen youth leaders occupied the inner circle of a

multi-purpose room, while the older experts obligingly took back seats. The youth made the first moves in what had been programmed as a dialogue with representatives of local and international institutions about violence prevention among youth at risk. The seniors followed. But the cautious choreography could not really mitigate the asymmetries of the interchange. For one thing, the framework for the meeting was an existing outline of a plan to promote analysis and intervention. It had been drafted by the U.N. Safer Cities committee, not by the youth who had been invited as aides to development, or as informants. They were less interested in the document than in engaging or confronting local authorities who were allegedly stinting on their support for youth development. Those authorities countered with observations of limited resources and also with a challenge to youth leaders to develop more autonomous projects that would wean them from depending on municipal support.

It was time to take a break, to regroup and attempt to get beyond the impasse of local demands and disappointments, especially since the agenda was to develop a general design for a U.N. program. By then, I had begun a conversation with Jaime Serna, a peace-making DJ who had managed to compose a musical band from members of warring forces: guerrillas and para-militaries, and was now concerned but not discouraged by the deadlock between youth and city government. At dinner that evening I learned from Jorge Gaviria—the architect of Medellín’s Program in Peace and Reconciliation—how Jaime came to create his band. The young man had come to the municipal offices to complain that he had received more than one death threat from both sides of the violent outbreaks in Comuna 13. At the time, Jaime was teaching rope-climbing rescue techniques, his back exposed to danger. “What else are you interested in?” Jorge asked. The question is emblematic of his creative approach to conflict resolution. More interested in restorative than in punitive justice, Gaviria directs the city’s resources and energies for violence prevention towards constructive alternatives to violence. Jaime answered that he had some talent for music, and Jorge’s inspired response was an invitation to constitute the combatants into a music group. With nothing to lose, given his threatened and precarious existence, Jaime accepted the challenge to turn conflict into counterpoint.

During the same informal dinner conversation, I learned from Jorge that his program operates in prisons to train inmates for employment, and to initiate gainful employment during the inmates’ periods of incarceration. But alongside these evidently practical programs there is necessary motivational work to do for youth who lack the expectation or even the desire to live long productive lives. Motivation often comes from participation in art; for example, the music lessons and instruments that the program provides to engage disaffected youth. Peace and Reconciliation also operates a secondary school for over 3,000 parolees and socially re-integrated ex-combatants. “No one drops out,” Gaviria told the few of us at his table with

profound satisfaction. I was incredulous. Drop-out rates are almost twice that of graduation rates in many parts of the Americas, including New England, I was not proud to say. What was the magic of Medellín's school for troubled teens that they kept coming back to learn and to connect to their community? A psychologist by training, Gaviria stressed the importance of community building activities. But then he added—not as an afterthought but as the core principle—that the school's success depends on its ludic and artistic curriculum. Art and play, in the sense of infinite possibilities rather than in the sense of competitive sports, made going to school a freely assumed institutional commitment for youth who had previous records of violating legitimate institutions. I thanked Gaviria sincerely for his work, for his lucid reflection on the nature of the work, and also for the promise he gave me that in future deliberations on violence prevention he will speak up about the importance of the arts as vehicles for rehabilitation and reinsertion.

Notes

1. See Chapter 1, "Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God." Rorty 3–26.
2. See Schiller, 148–56.

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