



INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Carlos Motta: We The Enemy

January 23–March 14, 2020

UC SANTA CRUZ

## Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery

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### **Carlos Motta: *We The Enemy* A Political Reckoning and a Rising Resistance**

Rachel Nelson

“The power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past.”

“Fundamentally, the dead should be formally prohibited from stirring up disorder in the present.”

—Achille Mbembe

*Carlos Motta: We The Enemy*, an exhibition of recent works by the internationally acclaimed artist, gathers suppressed histories of social and political subjection from different corners of history—from the persecution of LGBTQIA+ individuals under ecclesiastical colonialism in the Americas to the fraught history of medical research and HIV/AIDS. With video works and performance documentation, historical subjugations and present abuses overlap and times merge in *We The Enemy*. And, yet, there is no drowning in these currents of trauma. Instead, the oppressed are unmoored from history in Motta’s poignant and stirring artworks and stand together, a rising and palpable resistance.

The exhibition begins with the sounds of the world cleaving.

The artwork that opens the show and which gives it its name, *We The Enemy*, 2019, is a video manifesto by a collective Motta formed with John Arthur Peetz and Carlos Maria Romero known as SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!) The manifesto compiles the litany of slurs and insults that have been directed at LGBTQIA+ people. For the video, the Greek artist Despina Zacharopoulou carefully enunciates the terms, “fairies...dykes...AIDS carriers.” The compilation of abuses reverberates from the biblical past “sodomite” to today’s sharp twist, “those on PrEP,”<sup>1</sup> a paired down telling of a long history of social and political disenfranchisement.

The archive of insults resonates against the backdrop of recent United States legislation that allows discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity under the guise of “religious protections” and bans transgender individuals from serving in the military. This history constructed through denigration also names the broader mode of nationalism under which such discrimination thrives. Highlighting the historical emphasis on rendering some—delineated through sexual desire and gender identification—*enemies*, the exhibition draws a line between current oppressions and the political philosophy detailed by German theorist Carl Schmitt in 1927. A conservative who joined the Nazi party in 1933, Schmitt was describing and prescribing a political methodology when he wrote “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>2</sup> According to Schmitt, political unity and national pride are best achieved by finding common cause in identifying enemies and rooting them out.

*We The Enemy* takes historical inventory and suggests a reckoning is coming from this longstanding divisive politics. There is a brief silence following the last slur, “degenerates.” Then, a warning: “We...are and will always be the enemy.” With these words, *We The Enemy* begins to assemble those made enemies across decades and centuries of discrimination and oppression.

*Corpo Fechado: The Devil’s Work*, 2019, the next work in the exhibition, is part of this gathering. The 24-minute multilayered video dramatizes the true story of José Francisco Pereira, who in the 18th century was kidnapped from West Africa and sold into slavery in Brazil. In 1731, after Pereira was sold to a slaveholder in Portugal, the courts of the Lisbon Inquisition tried him for sorcery for creating and distributing *bolsas de mandinga*—amulets to protect the enslaved. He was also charged with sodomy. For these perceived crimes, Pereira was exiled from Lisbon and condemned to end his days rowing in a galley, never again to set foot on shore.<sup>3</sup>

*Corpo Fechado* summons Pereira—sorcerer and sodomite—from the seas in which he was banished. Pereira emerges, staring out of the screen with large, luminous eyes, now “perhaps” the angel of history described by

German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin. In his critique of historicism and rejection of the idea of time as the continuum of progress, Benjamin describes the angel of history being propelled into the future with his face turned towards the past, staring in horror at the wreckage accumulating before him.<sup>4</sup>

"A storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm."<sup>5</sup>



Pereira's gaze remains fixed as he describes the ruins that trail with him as he is blown into our shared future—of being kidnapped, stripped of his name, and baptized a slave. In between texts woven together from Inquisition trial records and Saint Peter Damian's infamous *Book of Gomorrah*, 1049, which declared sodomy as an unrepentable sin, Pereira speaks of rituals practiced in the struggle for freedom and the desires of inhabiting a body deemed "impenetrable" by the Church and those who claim to own him. Cloaked in the robes of his twin crimes—sorcery and sodomy—Pereira wanders through churches and museums in Portugal, the baroque backdrop of *Corpo Fechado*, tracing the "progress" of the history that condemned him for his beliefs and desires.<sup>6</sup>

This progress (and persecution) tracks into the present in an accompanying video interview, *I Mark My Presence with my Own Beliefs*, 2019, with the actor who plays Pereira, Paulo Pascoal. The actor explains that when he came out as gay in a 2014 TEDxLuanda talk, he was subsequently forced into exile from his home country, Angola. He now resides in Lisbon, trapped in a sort of immigration limbo, unable to re-enter Portugal if he should leave. The lives of these two men born hundreds of years merge across the two videos, as current immigration politics blend into a history of theology, slavery, and colonialism.

In the epigraph that opens this essay, Achille Mbembe argues that present politics depend on omissions of the past. As he writes, "the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time...anaesthetise the past," and omit from history that which disrupts present narratives of progress.<sup>7</sup> Current time has much to fear from history, in Mbembe's assessment, and from the dead who, if awakened, can stir "up disorder."<sup>8</sup> Motta has summoned Pereira as sorcerer, sodomite, and angel back from the dead. Beyond bearing witness to past ruins of the past, he brings with him a history to wreak havoc on the present.

In the final small gallery of *We The Enemy is Legacy*, 2019, the video documentation of a 27-minute endurance performance by Motta. For this performance, the artist wears a dental gag as he attempts to tell the timeline of HIV/AIDS from 1908 to 2019, as dictated to him by the U.S. radio broad-

caster Ari Shapiro. With his mouth forced open by the metal instrument, the history that Motta tries to tell, one in which people, primarily LGBTQIA+, are left to die through governmental and medical neglect, is rendered almost unspeakable. The performance enacts the difficulties of recovering pasts and bringing back the dead. And yet, it is precisely within the confusion created by a history obscured that the dead gather, intent on disordering the present.

In Motta's resurrection of harsh records of persecution and oppression of people rendered different by gender, sexuality, and race, histories accumulate. One of the curses of history is that it is impossible to change the course leading to the current moment. Despite the terrible inevitability of the past, however, Motta's powerful artworks evoke history in order to make ruins out of present structures of persecution and discrimination. *We The Enemy* begins and ends in defiance: if we are the enemies, then enemies we shall be—united against those who are friends to oppression.

#### Notes

Epigraph: Achille Mbembe. "The Power of the Archive and its Limits." *Refiguring the Archive*. (CapeTown: David Philip Publishers, 2002), 19–26.

1. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (or PrEP) is a daily medicine that can be taken to prevent HIV.

2. Carl Schmitt. *The Concept of the Political*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

3. See also Jack McGraw. *Carlos Motta: Conatus*. (New York: P.P.O.W. Gallery, 2019), accessed December 20, 2019, <https://carlosmotta.com/project/conatus/>

4. Walter Benjamin. "On the Concept of History." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael J. Jennings. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 389–400.

5. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 392.

6. See also Denise Ferreira da Silva. *Corpus Infinitum*. (Lisbon: Galerias Municipais, 2019), accessed December 20, 2019, [https://carlosmotta.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DENISE\\_FERREIRA.pdf](https://carlosmotta.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DENISE_FERREIRA.pdf)

7. Mbembe, *Refiguring*, 23.

8. Mbembe, *Refiguring*, 22.

#### Image Credits

Cover: Carlos Motta, *A Narrow Gate through Which God Could Enter* from *Corpo Fechado—The Devil's Work*, 2018. Video still. Courtesy of P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

Interior center: Carlos Motta, *Pieta* from *Corpo Fechado—The Devil's Work*, 2018. Video still. Courtesy of P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

Inside flap: Carlos Motta, *Legacy*, 2019, Video still. Courtesy of P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

Back panel: Carlos Motta, *Corpo Fechado—The Devil's Work*, 2018. Installation view at P.P.O.W Gallery. Courtesy of P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.



1983: The CDC reports 3,153 cases of HIV/AIDS in the U.S.

Carlos Motta's (b. 1978, Colombia) multi-disciplinary art practice documents the social conditions and political struggles of sexual, gender, and ethnic minority communities in order to challenge dominant and normative discourses through visibility and self-representation. As a historian of untold narratives and an archivist of repressed histories, Motta is committed to in-depth research on the struggles of post-colonial subjects and societies. His work manifests in a variety of mediums including video, installation, sculpture, drawing, web-based projects, performance, and symposia.

Motta has been the subject of survey exhibitions including at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Colombia (2017), Matucana 100, Santiago, Chile (2018), and Röda Sten Konsthall, Göteborg, Sweden (2015). His work is in the permanent collections of the The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona; and Museo de Arte de Banco de la República, Bogotá, among others. His solo exhibitions include Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo (2019); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017); Pérez Art Museum, Miami (2016); Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (2016); PinchukArtCentre, Kiev (2015); Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City (2013); New Museum, New York (2012); MoMA PS1, New York (2009);

and Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2009). Motta participated in 32 Bienal de São Paulo (2016); X Gwangju Biennale (2014); and X Lyon Biennale (2010). His films have been screened at the Rotterdam Film Festival (2016, 2010); Toronto International Film Festival (2013); and Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur (2016); among others. Motta has been awarded the Vilcek Foundation's Prize for Creative Promise (2017); the PinchukArtCentre's Future Generation Art Prize (2014); and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2008). Motta is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Practice at Pratt University.

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Organized by Rachel Nelson, interim director, Institute of the Arts and Sciences, UC Santa Cruz



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