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## Heike Gatzmaga: Interview with François Bucher, December 2008

The real lesson of art is how to live

"I come with a beard," he texts, shortly later the door opens to Café Sankt Oberholtz in Berlin's Mitte. He storms inside, dressed in a simple parka and long black hair, the very image of Ché Guevara. It is not just the beard. The man glows like a revolutionary. He sits down at the table and feverishly tells me about his latest project. He has just seen the film stills from a trip to his native Colombia. "Cali is the Silicon Valley of Colombia. Have you heard of the telenovela 'Without Tits, There's no Paradise?' Everybody in the world comes here for cosmetic surgery. Cali has gone to hell, it has fallen prey to a rampant materialism, a culture of appearance!" But he has just made peace with his home town. Because it was there, that he recently experienced the "best night of his life." François Bucher clearly is not an artist who produces complacent art; he pushes the limit to find answers.

He could indeed boast of his success. Bucher has exhibited throughout the world. But instead of talking about his success, he tells me about his home town Cali. Here everything comes together, not just his personal history. "Cali is a crystallization of the world," he says, he was raised by two professors as a sheltered child in a place akin to the South of the United States, a place of sugar cane plantations, tepid swimming pools and barbecues.

But the bubble of security soon burst. By the late 80s, the Cali cartel was in full control of the city. The social structure of the city was reorganized. Suddenly, he says, there was social mobility, people from another social class and race were driving their own Ferraris and Jaguars. A great deal of hatred was circulating. Bucher, who was in his teens at the time, learned what fear was. Going to a disco with a beautiful girl meant, he says, jumping out of a window if you wanted to save your own life. Four or five of his acquaintances, one of them a dear friend, were killed in incidents involving the mafia.

Today, he invokes that lost time, but back then he wanted to break away from it. Bucher left Cali behind to "reinvent himself". In 1999, he earned a degree in film studies from Chicago. He shot his first film as a Whitney Fellow in New York, moved to Brooklyn and stayed there for five years. In the city he loves and which, as he says, "drives you completely", he found his motifs. His first film, "Twin Murders" (1999), focused on a symbolic parricide. The film, which he worked on for two years, was like a self-initiation for him. In 2001, when al-Qaida pilots smashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and post-9/11 America drifted off into an hysterical and xenophobic national trauma, Bucher shot the 30-minute video "White Balance (To think is to forget differences)" (2002), a bitter parody of the U.S. war rhetoric.

Colombia continues to hold an attraction for him. In "Haute surveillance" (2007), a two-channel installation, shown during the exhibition "Rational Irrational" at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2008, Bucher again turned to violence in his homeland. Also "Haute surveillance", a title alluding to Jean Genet's play of 1949, is a montage. Interviews follow news clips, landscapes and signs create moods. A few professors, a young charismatic lecturer: all are witnesses, reporting about 1999, when a wave of violence claimed three victims on the university campus of Medellin. The interviewees exude an aura of helplessness. Then two students write a screenplay in honor of the

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

poet Genet: their Medellin of the 90s mirrors Genet, Genet mirrors Medellin. Fiction and reality blur, but only in fiction a lasting crescendo of horror becomes real.

"The ethical individual may need to break moral standards," says Bucher, as he drinks his latte macchiato and continues to ponder the Cali Sodom and Gomorrah. This time he has returned with filmed interviews of his friends – intense images from his perhaps most intense trip. They are beautiful, meditative. Again they deal with violence, the "disease" of Cali, but also with his own healing. Of all things, he finds it through drugs. "The Indians are gaining influence and are negotiating with the government. The shamans have also returned to the cities, bringing with them medicine from the earth," says the artist. They bring Yage into the city, also known as vine of souls or vine of death. The intoxicating drink is deeply rooted in the cultural experience of Colombia and its neighbors. Even his mother and sister had tried the drug many years ago. The vine of souls purifies the soul, he says, physical symptoms such as vomiting are also part of the experience. Nonetheless it is a safe form of intoxication, because the shamans which see the drink as the gate to the spiritual world, accompany those who are taking such a trip. Bucher films and writes, transforms his experience into art. Yage is a revelation for him. His trip reconciles him with Cali, because it was there he experienced the "most beautiful night of his life". In the holy ecstasy of the vine of souls, he sees something, perhaps an all-pervasive beauty that takes away the fear. "You need to have a relationship with the image; you have to follow the form, which is always there. Staying present with this beauty is crucial – not to move from the present ... The real lesson of art," he says, "is how to live. You have the choice between love and fear, there is no other choice. "