

13 THE GOOD LIFE/LA BUENA VIDA

Carlos Motta with Eva Díaz, Freckles Studio,
and Stamatina Gregory

Key Words: Archive, Cinema Vérité, Grass Roots Activism, Installation Art, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Public Opinion, Reflexive Sociology, Relational Aesthetics, Social Activism, *Third Cinema*, *Vita Activa*

Project Summary

The Good Life/La Buena Vida is a multi-part video project composed of over 400 video interviews with pedestrians on the streets of 12 cities in Latin America, shot between 2005 and 2008. The work examines processes of democratization as they relate to US interventionist policies in the region. *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* is formed of an Internet archive (la-buena-vida.info), a video installation, and a series of commissioned texts and articles.

Introduction

The Good Life/La Buena Vida was a four-year project that shaped itself in response to the experience of its making: at first, my idea was to make a documentary about the way in

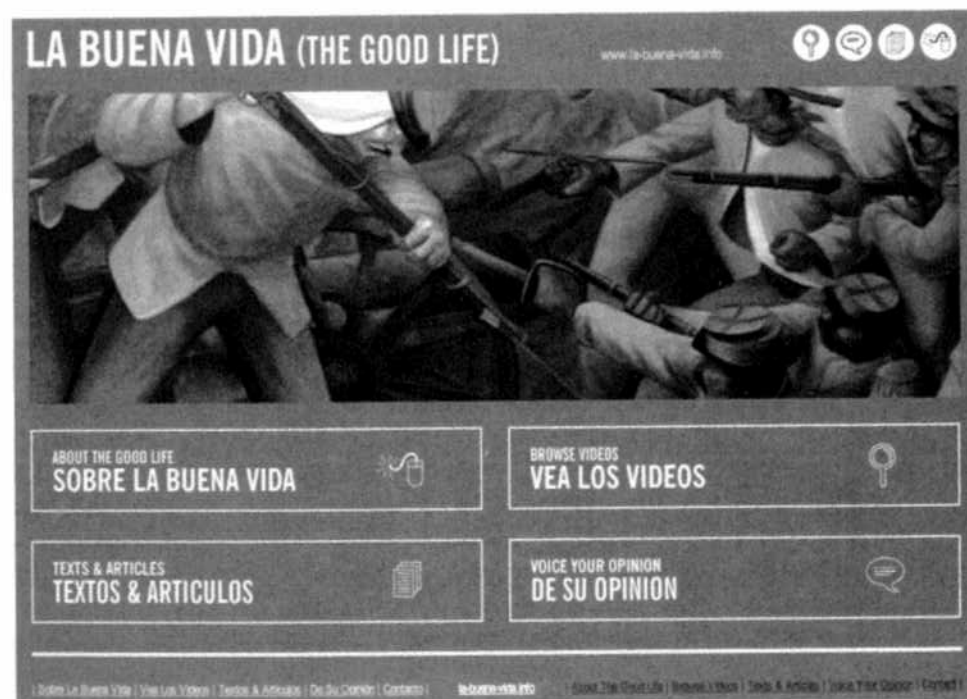


Figure 13.1 *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* by Carlos Motta.

which ordinary Latin Americans perceived the influence of US foreign policy in that region. I knew I wanted to base it on street interviews recorded on video, but thought I would construct a linear narrative (most likely in the form of a film). As I started to gather the hundreds of interviews that compose the work it became apparent that I needed to let the material “tell me” how its form should shape. At the same time, I started to think of formal strategies, artistic methodologies, and (art) historical precedents that treated similar kinds of initiatives.

The Good Life/La Buena Vida became a multi-part video project composed of over 400 video interviews with pedestrians on the streets of 12 cities in Latin America, shot between 2005 and 2008. The work examines processes of democratization as they relate to US interventionist policies in the region. The conversations and dialogues, recorded in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Guatemala, La Paz, Managua, Mexico City, Panamá, Santiago, San Salvador, São Paulo, and Tegucigalpa, cover topics such as individuals’ perceptions of US foreign policy, democracy, leadership, and governance. The result is a wide spectrum of responses and opinions, which vary according to local situations and specific forms of government in each country.

Why I Made *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* by Carlos Motta

In 1968 Argentinean filmmaker Fernando “Pino” Solanas made *La Hora de Los Hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*), a radical political documentary and manifesto that unapologetically advocated the construction of a just society, free from the forces of bourgeois neo-colonialism and US and European imperialism. This major work, emblematic of 1960s revolutionary filmmaking, is a heartfelt cry for independence. Solanas and his co-screenwriter Octavio Getino formed the Grupo Cine Liberación (Liberation Cinema Group) and went on to formulate what they called Tercer Cine (Third Cinema), a film practice that articulated the social, political, and economic illnesses of the time from the perspective of “the people.” Third Cinema distanced itself from the commercial pressure of Hollywood and the seemingly uncompromising attitude of European films *d’auteur*. Film for the Third Cinema was an aesthetic instrument to politicize, liberate, and create an awakening of critical consciousness.

Similarly, the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire was motivated by the rejection of the inequalities of the established social order, which enforced an elitist “banking model” of education in which information is “deposited” into students, who are expected to digest it without asking questions. Freire, alternatively, emphasized dialogue and praxis as means of developing a consciousness that has the power to transform reality. Freire, like Solanas and Getino, was interested in developing critical tools for people to use as means to liberate themselves from oppression.

The decades that followed the release of *La Hora de Los Hornos* shattered Solanas’ as well as Freire’s social and political dreams. Since the 1970s, the United States has backed several military coups and dictatorships, civil wars, counter-revolutions, and countless other forms of intervention throughout the continent to systematically eradicate any (socialist) project that may have challenged its economic power. Today, 40 years later, Latin America is still bleeding, dependent, ignorant, violent, poor, and oppressed. These works—their political and historical contexts—have been important conceptual and methodological references for the making of *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*.

The work is structured in the form of an Internet archive (la-buena-vida.info), which provides several ways to search or access the material. It holds all of the unedited video

interviews, in an attempt to make the process of the work's making *transparent*, to allow the viewers to reflect on the inherent problems of interviewing, and to see the *fabrication* of these video "documents." The project also maintains a critical distance from the mainstream media's use of similar tactics, such as the interview, to promote "truthful" and "objective" information as well as from the notion of "public opinion." In other words, while *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* uses strategies common to journalism and documentary film, it does not pretend to show "reality as it is." *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* exposes a subjective and personal interpretation of "reality as it should be." These "documents" are not neutral, and my mediation and ideology, as well as that of the interviewees, are explicit.

The Good Life/La Buena Vida asks difficult questions today, after years of exploitation and dependency have determined the fate of the majority of civilians throughout Latin America. This work is born out of a desire to generate an inter-generational public dialogue about the actions of the United States and how they are perceived today, given the different levels of intervention in the region. I was interested in inquiring about the perception of political concepts such as democracy and leadership, and more importantly about their implementation, considering the critical importance that these concepts play in *our* social development. How have these concepts been constructed in countries as diverse as Honduras or Chile, where US involvement has been radically different? Can one speak of democratic nations in Latin America, a geographic region defined by social inequality? What is the role of civilians and/or social movements within the different political systems of the region?

These, among many other questions, are part of an attempt to underline the need for a systematization of inquiry (political, social, and historical) and rejection of abuse, manipulation, and violence. The proposed system does not attempt to impose another hegemonic worldview. Instead, it magnifies unheard voices and opinions about the complex set of relations that have maintained the majority of our continent poor and underrepresented. In the process of creating *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*, my status, and that of those involved in the work, have been reclaimed as conscious, informed, and critical citizens and subjects.

Historical Perspectives

A Selection from "An Interview on the Interview: A Conversation between Carlos Motta and Eva Díaz"¹

EVA DÍAZ: The last part of *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* project is a searchable Internet archive (la-buena-vida.info) of the over 400 videotaped interviews you conducted with pedestrians in 12 Latin American cities about the history of United States interventions in the region and the socio-political effects of those disruptions. I'll come to the substance of those interviews in a minute, but I want to consider the precedents in film and artistic practice for such a project, and the interrelated issue of your engagement with sociological methods such as field research and participant survey. In particular, an element of your approach seems to be a readdress of the history of artists' uses and appropriations of sociological/social science methods (interviews, data collection/archive management, longitudinal—or in your case latitudinal—studies, and forms of statistical compilation). One can trace a lineage from Hans Haacke's 1970 poll of MoMA visitors' political opinions to your work, for instance. On the other hand, *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* hearkens to late 1950s and early 1960s explorations of new forms of

documentary practices such as direct cinema's innovative use of hand-held cameras and synch sound, or more specifically *cinéma vérité's* approach to the passerby in street interviews. How did you come to the interview as a formal structure?

CARLOS MOTTA: As I started to consider a formal method to approach my interest in this fascinating yet enormous subject—the way *we* as citizens of Latin America perceive and assimilate personally and collectively the history of U.S. interventions in the region—I carefully looked at Latin American documentary film from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These decades staged several forms of resistance to what these filmmakers termed "American imperialism and bourgeois neo-colonialism," and witnessed the production of alternative ways of social empowerment via the politicization of culture. Filmmakers such as Fernando Birri and Fernando "Pino" Solanas in Argentina; Carlos Alvarez, and Jorge Silva and Marta Rodríguez in Colombia; Patricio Guzmán in Chile; and Jorge Sanjinez in Bolivia used film as a political tool to inform, instruct, educate, and stir "popular" audiences about their social conditions, and their political needs, rights, and responsibilities.

A shared interest for all of them—and a central subject for my project—was the production of alternative ways to construct "public opinion." A critical position with regard to the largely unquestioned manipulation of the mainstream media's production of political and social consent was essential to the creation of new forms of mediatic interaction. Perhaps influenced by the recently formed *cinéma vérité* approach in France led by Jean Rouch, and its informal aesthetics, some of these Latin American filmmakers were also going out on the streets equipped with a microphone and a hand-held camera confronting pedestrians with difficult questions, documenting social movements, and talking with individuals and groups about politics and society.

These historical precedents, as well as my growing concern about the corporate structure of the media—and its unapologetically biased reporting in the name of the "public"—led me to use the interview form in *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*. It was soon clear to me, though, that I wouldn't make a film but use only the interview form to underline and contest its potential for the acquisition of knowledge and information. While interviewing is commonly only one of the features of a documentary film (along with a voice-over narration, etc.), the interview for me was the means and the end. Consequently I sought for a form to organize these hundreds of interviews in a "democratic" way, which led me to the creation of an Internet archive (la-buena-vida.info).

ED: I'm glad you mentioned the media and its constitutive effect on public opinion. The agglomeration of the media into mega-corporations points to how the reproduction of the existing social order—the economic structure in which these corporations continue to be some of most profitable institutions owned by the wealthiest people on earth—is the fundamental form of consent they orchestrate. We are (too) familiar with the resulting cycle of fluff and mayhem that characterizes media entertainment logic, particularly for television. When you adopted the posture of the interviewer, but offered your set of seven questions on U.S. intervention and perceptions of democracy, obviously you created dissonance in the familiar media-based model of the interview. Did people pick up on that? Did your subjects reflect, on or off camera, on the form of media agency you yourself posed, or that you solicited from them?

CM: Upon beginning the project in Mexico City in 2005 I had to come up with a methodology to conduct the interviews that would work to achieve the kind of content I was looking for. I realized very soon—after several failed attempts—that the set up of the interviews I had seen and studied from several news channels and documentary films (including Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* and Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious*

(*Yellow*) wasn't the appropriate one for my project. Generally, in these works, a camera-person and interviewer approach a pedestrian or a group with a microphone in hand and confront them with a direct question, such as, "Do we have a class system in Sweden?" (Sjöman). The pedestrian chooses whether to stop and answer or not. The dynamics of this confrontation, the initial shock it may produce, the attraction or repulsion to the camera, the individual's time constraint, the particular bias intended with the question, etc., forecast the kind of answers that interviewers seek. This fast-paced acquisition of information and opinions on the street is often associated with the notion of "public opinion," which literally means the opinions of the public about a given subject in a public space confronted by the machine of the media. However, Rouch, Sjöman, and other *cinéma vérité* makers brilliantly deconstructed this notion in the 1960s with the careful insertion of key protagonists in their films (interviewer, interviewees, camera, microphone, etc.) that openly performed and commented on their assigned roles.

I chose a different approach for *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*. I wasn't interested in exposing the mechanisms behind the construction of the notion of "public opinion," but rather in inviting the interviewees to thoughtfully reflect and take time to comment on the questions I asked. Toward this aim, I never approached walking pedestrians but only individuals or groups that were sitting down in parks, waiting on street corners, or hanging out in other public spaces. I invited them to answer the questions after explaining who I was, what I wanted, where the material would be presented, and who was financing me. The idea was to give them as much information about my intention so that we would feel more inclined to have a dialogue.

In other words, and to answer your question more directly, yes and no. "My" subjects picked up "on the form of media agency" I posed most of the time primarily because I told them. Some people chose to truly engage with the questions and would then think of me more as researcher than as a journalist. But others were disappointed to find out that I was an artist and not a journalist that would guarantee them a spot on TV!

A Selection from "Speaking Democracy: Carlos Motta's *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*" by Stamatina Gregory²

The good life, as examined in Aristotle's *Ethics*, is engaged with both philosophical contemplation and with the practice of "ethical virtues," which involve participation in the life and affairs of the Athenian *polis*, or city-state. In the third book of his *Politics*, Aristotle details the possible involvement of citizens in these affairs: taking part in deliberative assemblies, holding rotating positions in government, and having a share in judicial office. His accounts reflect a conception of politics as an integral part of social life, instead of the separate and distinct sphere of social activity (such as economics, religion, or the aesthetic) it is relegated to today; even the verb in Greek for "to be a citizen" is synonymous with "to be active in managing the affairs of the city."³ Although the "state" of citizenship excluded broad swaths of the population such as women, foreigners, and slaves, the structure of the average Greek *polis* required an individual's commitment to civic participation far outstripping what is expected of the average citizen in the modern nation state.⁴

This classical conception of democracy is something which philosopher Hannah Arendt sought to recuperate in *The Human Condition* (1958), finding in Greek and Roman antiquity an extensive privileging of political life and political action which she felt had been lost in modernity. Her work critiques the trajectory of traditional Western political philosophy as an autonomous enterprise that holds itself above and apart from

the world of practical human action, and can be read to assert that a philosophy and life of labor, work, and action—the *vita activa*—must form the basis of democratic participation.⁵

For Arendt, action primarily constitutes public speech, and is the means by which individuals come to reveal their distinctive identities, encounter one another as members of a community, and exercise their capacity for agency.⁶ She holds up the Athenian *polis* as the model for this active, essential space of disclosure and communicative speech.⁷ This conceptual space for speech and action as delineated by Arendt, as well as the formal attributes of the democratic spaces of antiquity, are evoked in Carlos Motta's *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*.

Hailing from Bogotá, Colombia, Motta was interested in how U.S. interventionism was perceived across the continent, as well as in understanding the role of these events on his own perceptions of what it means to be a citizen, an acting subject in society. Basing his itinerary on cities that had been influenced by specific historical circumstances (sites of failed revolutions, military coups, and economic reforms), Motta, together with local assistants, sought out a range of individuals to speak with in each city. His dialogues with students, teachers, activists, laborers, etc., resulted in a spectrum of opinion which fluctuated according to local situations and forms of government. In Santiago, many responses touched on the overthrow of former Chilean president Salvador Allende in a military coup; in Buenos Aires, the recent economic impositions of the International Monetary Fund were a source of discussion. The dialogues explore the political and social landscapes of each city and the interview subjects' lives, unearthing personal narratives and revealing a breadth of collective memory. Each dialogue takes place outdoors, in parks, plazas, or sidewalks, transforming public space into a space of action through public disclosure.

Formally, the project exists in three parts: a sculptural installation that was initially developed for an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia in early 2008, which since then has traveled internationally;⁸ a publication in which artists Ashley Hunt, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Oliver Ressler, and political theorists Tatiana Flores, Maria Mercedes Gomez, and Juan Gabriel Tokatlián present essays in response to the question "What is democracy to you?"; and an online archive, *la-buena-vida.info*, which holds all video interviews and texts associated with the project. The three parts present different ways of experiencing the work: through a physical simulacrum of participating in dialogue in the installation, through sustained critical discourse of specific social issues as they relate to democratic ideas in the publication, and through a personalized process of navigating the vast amount of research material that the project generated (over 400 interviews, 40 hours of video, and a dozen texts) in the online archive.

In *la-buena-vida.info*, users initially encounter thumbnail images of all videos in a large grid and can select and watch them at random. The website, however, also offers a more considered way of approaching the material: users can identify videos through a set of broad categorizations based on gender, nationality, age, or profession, or they can review videos with particular subject tags such as "capitalism," "democracy," and "religion." Tagging is a common, vernacular practice in the creation and navigation of blogs and websites—tagging tools are now included in most generic blogging software. For Motta, however, the tagging process is an alternate, more democratic way of thinking through the process of video editing. Although it is also based on Motta's predetermined categories, tagging enables a viewing process partially constructed by the website's users.

The tags themselves—as well as the structure of the interviews and their means of identifying their subjects—take their structure and methodology from sociological or anthropological research. That structure has art historical precedents—August Sander's efforts to compile a photographic archive of German social "types" based on their vocation is the most canonical example.⁹ While the process of navigating through the archive is not a process of research in a statistically quantifiable way, it nevertheless is an invaluable repository of oral history. In an evocation of Arendt's space of public disclosure and her theorization of the *vita activa*, or "active life," which became increasingly important to Motta over the course of the project, *la-buena-vida.info* offers up interaction with hundreds of individuals speaking openly about the ways in which politics intimately affects their lives.

The Good Life/La Buena Vida takes a seemingly straightforward documentary approach to the interview process, though it makes overt references to the democratic spaces of antiquity. Neither strategy, however, is presented as unproblematic. The formal structure of the videos underscores the centrality of the speaking subject. Unlike some documentary work which focuses on the performative interaction between the interviewer or filmmaker and their subjects (along the lines of Michael Moore), Motta keeps the camera on the people he is speaking with, and his presence limited to his questions being read and heard. This is not an effort to efface the role of the interviewer or artist; rather, it functions as an acknowledgment of the critical importance of speech as action, and as a way for the dialogues to symbolically function as open and public.

As a whole, *la-buena-vida.info* makes a statement about the contested nature of the term "democracy" itself; a complex multiplicity of ideas over which people in political theory, social movements, and cultural practices hold their own sets of debates. Among the plethora of opinions on the concepts of democracy presented in *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*, one in particular recurs: the view that democracy necessarily means more than a single, occasional vote on a predetermined issue, or a vote for one of a set of pre-selected political candidates. A Caracas historian Motta interviews points out that the recent efforts in Venezuela to integrate ordinary citizens in decision-making processes through community councils qualify that country as a democracy. An 80-year-old Buenos Aires woman declares that, despite her age, she has yet to have "lived in an ample democracy," while a lawyer in Guatemala City disavows the term completely for any country limited to electoral processes. In listening to their statements, it becomes apparent to the viewer that Arendt's well-known arguments against representative democracy have a popular echo. For Arendt, the relinquishing of day-to-day deliberation and action to a small number of holders of power destroys the "space of appearance" in which citizenship can be fully realized.¹⁰ The recuperation of this space clearly occupies a wider political imaginary for Motta and his subjects.

Technical Description by Freckles Studio (Antonio Serna and Peggy Tan)¹¹

When we were asked to create a web component for *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*, artist Carlos Motta had just completed and digitized the 400 video interviews that spanned over three years in time and geographically covered a good half of the American continent. Our challenge was to translate Motta's video project into an Internet archive (*la-buena-vida.info*) that would conceptually carry the essence of his project.

The Visual Quilt

The first question we asked ourselves was how we could present all these videos to the public in a way that visually represents the scope of the project. The solution was to create a large quilt of video thumbnails (12 thumbnails wide and 30 deep). The idea for the quilt was inspired by the *The Good Life/La Buena Vida*'s installation component initially presented at the ICA in Philadelphia. At that venue Motta presented a gallery with photos from the project along the walls that surrounded the central video-viewing stands. The website functions in a similar way by immediately presenting the viewer with images from all the videos that emphasize the magnitude of the project.

Navigating Further

The second part of the challenge was to figure out the best way to navigate through this archive and find information of interest. Instead of a traditional navigation system we decided to create a visual search experience that would allow the viewers direct interaction with the video quilt. Viewers would have the option to filter through these videos by selecting specific questions, region, age, gender, occupation, and themes in any combination. This filtering process would reduce the number of thumbnails without repositioning the results, creating a visual chart of the selections in proportion to the sampling interviews. Conversely, keeping the empty frames reminds the user of her editing decisions.

In addition to creating this filtering system, we added time stamps for each question in the videos so that the viewer could choose to jump to a specific answer to a question posed by the artist.

A Note from Carlos Motta about the Artist-Designer-Programmer Relationship

I met with a series of web designers and programmers to learn about the technical and formal possibilities of such form. Among these, Freckles Studio and Dave Della Costa proposed an interesting way of designing the interface and back-end programming. With an Art in General New Commissions Program Grant, I was able to hire them and we worked together for a year in designing the piece. The relationship was very smooth. As a "client" I was able to closely work with them and make sure that my concept was translated visually. Their suggestions and thorough technical knowledge were precise and made my ideas physically and technically feasible.

Afterthoughts on the Internet Archive (www.la-buena-vida.info) of *The Good Life/La Buena Vida* by Carlos Motta

A year into the filming and after realizing that I was actually building a kind of archive, the Internet archive became a useful tool that informed the way I continued to interview. I allowed for longer conversations to take place and started to include an even wider range of subjects; this expansive approach resulted in being increasingly more democratic. Had I opted to go ahead with the original idea of making a film I would have had to "edit" in the back of my mind; this approach, on the other hand, allowed me to be less scripted. Now that the work is finished I am pleased with these decisions. As time has passed, the interviews are frozen in time. The archive represents a particular time period