Imagining Otherwise: Sofía Córdova's Language for Liberation

Through her work, Córdova seeks to remind us that revolution is a collective process, often enacted by marginalized groups, whose labor is then decentered or erased. Central to *GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry* is the idea that revolution is messy, non-linear, and marked by both failure and resilience.

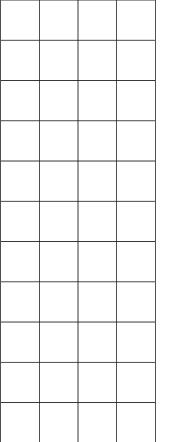
by Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle

One must always try to be as radical as reality itself.

Sofía Córdova, GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Yellow: Break Room (2019–2021)

Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova





On the evening of February 7, 2024, CCA's Grad Fine Arts division and the Creative Citizens in Action initiative co-hosted mixed media artist Sofía Córdova (Adjunct II Professor, Graduate Film Program) for a talk entitled "New Works: Sofía Córdova." She was invited to speak about her newest work, *GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry* (2019-present), a series of short films that meditate on the histories, processes, and futures of revolution. Revolution as gathering, as community, as unrest, as possibility, as worlds born and reborn.

Córdova was introduced by one of her students, Yue Xiang (MFA Fine Arts 2024). Xiang's introduction was thoughtful and personal, and made clear Córdova's significant impact as a mentor and educator, as well as an artist. Xiang's deep admiration and respect for Córdova set the tone for a lecture imbued with care, rigor, and collaboration.



GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Yellow: Break Room (2019–2021) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova

Córdova's presence on stage was both firm and grounding, inviting and open. Before speaking about her practice, she began her lecture by naming the violent genocide against the Palestinian people. To hold space for Palestine cast a particularly urgent light on the rest of Córdova's talk – drawing a direct and contemporary relationship between the artist's interest in decolonial liberation and the world as it stands.

Art—making it, writing about it, talking about it—can feel like an insignificant response to oppression and subjugation. In many ways it is, and must be considered alongside direct action and organizing as tools of resistance. However, Córdova's practice is a reminder of art's liberatory potential as a way to radically imagine the world otherwise.

It's nice to be in control of your annihilation.

GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Yellow: Break Room (2019–2021) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova It was fitting, then, that to transition into a discussion of her artwork, she declared, "In the spirit of a new world that is begging to be born."

Córdova began by introducing the series' overall conceptual framework. The word guillotine is a reference to traditional symbols of historical revolution, which she both references and undermines. Her work is largely guided by two questions: "What is revolution to me?" and "How have I been taught it?" For Córdova, revolution is as much about undoing and unlearning as it is about building and educating. Córdova's work does both. Her work references historical revolutions, with a particular focus on Latin America, while also combating the popular (and historically imagined) conception that revolutions are fought and won under singular male leadership. Through her work, Córdova seeks to remind us that revolution is a collective process, often enacted by marginalized groups, whose labor is then decentered or



está guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor. is guided by deep feelings of love

> Sofía Córdova, GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Yellow: Break Room (2019-2021) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova

erased. Central to *GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry* is the idea that revolution is messy, non-linear, and marked by both failure and resilience. To convey this reality in her films, Córdova does not present visual information in chronological order. This anti-linearity becomes a recurring anti-capitalist and anti-colonial aesthetic threaded throughout the films.

So far, Córdova has made two films within the *GUILLOTINÆ* Wanna-*Cry* series, and she screened a few clips of each during her lecture. The first is *GUILLOTINÆ* WannaCry, Yellow: Break Room (2019-2021). The film features four characters—performed by dancers Stephanie Hewett, alex cruse, Kevin Lo, and Córdova herself—moving around a small room, sometimes independently and sometimes together. The room is awash in yellow hues, decorated sparsely with a table and chair, a hanging lamp, and a large sculpture resembling a ladder tipped on its side. Red flowers—some in a vase and a few stems loose on the table—puncture the yellowy haze. The performers are dressed alike in pale yellow jumpsuits inspired by the utilitarian aesthetic of Russian constructivism, and their faces are painted with crude shapes in primary colors. As Córdova explained, their painted expressions were loosely inspired by emojis.

GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Green: Savage Sauvage Salvaje (2022) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova





GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Green: Savage Sauvage Salvaje (2022) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova

The film alternates between one and three channels: on one channel we see the action occurring in the room, another features a close-up of a single dancer against a solid yellow background, and another shows a series of archival footage and images from various revolutions. The narration includes a plurality of voices. The sample-based score brings together Youtube comments, reality TV quotations, speeches from revolutionaries, and selections from an Adrienne Rich essay. The visuals and narration appear at times alone, at times side by side, but most often they are layered over one another. Through these formal decisions, Córdova visually and sonically signals the layering of time and place, and performs the destabilization and ambiguity necessary to create change. Córdova tells us that her use of the color yellow is also a reference to this generative instability, and that, through this video work, she is forging a new language of revolution.

The second film she shared was *GUILLOTINÆ* WannaCry, Green: Savage Sauvage Salvaje (2022). In this film, Córdova turns her attention to nature and the land. To ground our understanding of the film, Córdova explains that imperio-colonialism conflates the racialized "other" with the land or place they live, and both are then subject to harmful extractive practices. Córdova's film acts in opposition to this dynamic. The film is shot outside, in an unnamed natural site characterized by dense trees, grasses, and a clear body of water. The three protagonistic characters in the film are stone, seed, and leaf, performed by Rashaun Mitchell, Meg Jala, and Córdova. The single-channel film features shots of the landscape, interlaced with scenes of each dancer embodying their respective characters. The dancers move in and out of the river, through the trees and branches, and crouch low to the earth, performing collaboratively with the land around them. Rather than give them strict choreographic instruction, Córdova shared vague textural and narrative instructions with Mitchell and Jala, working together organically to bring the movements to life.

The musical score was also a space of collaboration, as Córdova worked with Matthew Gonzalez Kirkland (together they form the group XUXA SANTAMARIA) to compose the score. Similar to the voices in *Yellow: Break Room*, the narrated text is a composite script made from poems, first person historical accounts, and voices from pop culture. In its entirety, *Green: Savage Sauvage*

GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry, Green: Savage Sauvage Salvaje (2022) Photo courtesy of Sofía Córdova

that, where

small birds hide and dodge and lift their plaintive rallying cries Salvaje was a particularly captivating expression of the themes central to Córdova's work. The natural landscape in conversation with the dancers' organic movements, alongside a confluence of voices past and present effectively performed the conflation of time and space Córdova spoke about at the start of the talk.

Córdova's lecture—and the work she shared—is deeply layered with information, historical context, and references ranging from critical race theory to popular culture. In the hands of another artist, this formal and conceptual density could feel inaccessible or overwhelming. Córdova, however, generously invites us to think and imagine alongside her. Grounded in the realities of our past and present, her films are both measured and urgent, deliberate and unafraid, gesturing toward a decolonial future. I left Córdova's lecture thinking deeply about the ways in which art can be a language for ideas, worlds, and futures we have yet to realize. Córdova shared that she is currently working on the next film in the *GUILLOTINÆ WannaCry* series, and I look forward to seeing what comes next.

Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2024) is a writer and curator whose interdisciplinary research centers on decolonial notions of selfhood and community.