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Peaceful Bullets

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By Diana Duque

Within the realm of made things, thingamabobs deserve special notice as a type of fantastical object which exerts agency, infused with a do-it-yourself quality that seems somewhat at odds with the technology of the moment. The preternatural qualities of such things give context through which to consider the rather strange physical fragment known as the *Balígrafo*, or bulletpen, and its significance in a public campaign of peace taking place in 2016 after almost half a century of armed conflict between the Colombian government and the leftist guerrillas (FARC), in which more than 200,000 lives were sacrificed and 7 million people were displaced.

The Balígrafo was a marketing tool issued by the country's Ministry of Education. (Fig. 1) Balígrafo, in Spanish, is a portmanteau of two unlikely elements: *bala* (bullet) and *bolígrafo* (pen). The bulletpen is contrived from the unlikely pairing of the metal casings from a hollowed-out 0.50 caliber machine gun bullet and


the spine of a modern-day ballpoint pen. The reconfiguration of two wildly different communicative objects validates the strangeness of the re-imagined stylus. Comparable in scale and weight to the average fountain pen, this polished copper “thing” resembles the carefully crafted props contrived from discarded machine parts seen in steampunk fiction and film. Using it feels like traveling back in time.

While it tries to function like a pen, the Balígrafo is embedded with an awkward and unsettling friction, as it attempts to reconcile its physicality (the gross girth and recognizable-yet-disorienting exterior of the bullet) with its peculiar symbolic *raison d'être*. The clue to the latter is given by the slogan engraved on the polished casing of the recycled bullet. It reads, “BULLETS MARKED OUR PAST, EDUCATION WILL WRITE OUR FUTURE.”¹ Ostensibly formerly used in combat, the casings were supplied to the Ministry of Education by the Colombian Military Industry (Indumil). The Ministry viewed the symbolic effort to gather, clean, and recycle samplings of cartridges fired during earlier stages of the conflict as an opportunity to promote the cleansing and absolution of the sins of war—a powerful message in an overwhelmingly Catholic country.

Commissioned by the Education Ministry “to change the image of war and give identity to the peace that is forthcoming,”² the bulletpen was developed as a collaboration between the designers Reinhard Dienes, Pablo Fog, and the Colombian office of the advertising agency McCann Worldgroup. The pen was first unveiled to the public when it was presented to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos as a Christmas gift in 2015. Subsequently given strictly as an honorific gift or sold at auctions to build scholarship funds for orphans of the armed conflict, the Balígrafo was intended to be a symbol of hope (at least in the hopes of the government), disseminating “a message of optimism” concerning the peace process and the resettlement of internally displaced people.

The particularity of the Balígrafo has given it notoriety that has extended well beyond the borders of Colombia. It won a Gold award in the PR category at

the 2016 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.³ The pen later shot into international spotlight on September 26, 2016, when it was used in the historic signing of the first draft of the peace accord. The event took place in Havana, Cuba, with dignitaries present such as former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, former US Secretary of State John Kerry, and current Cuban President Raul Castro. The bulletpen was used to transcribe the signatures of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and Timoleón “Timochenko” Jiménez, Commander in Chief of the FARC.

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Throughout the country, the pen is certainly thought to have symbolic force. According to the late Colombian author Fernando Soto Aparicio, the Balígrafo is a powerful weapon of reconstruction—one capable of firing ideas and encouraging words and images of peace to unfold from its tip.⁴ With this sentiment in mind, the government sent out a small army of 500 bulletpens to educators, artists, and other supporters of the Ministry’s peace initiative.⁵

Let us consider what this object means outside of the pre-scripted slogans. Is it noble or false? Hopeful or apocalyptic? While the rhetoric around the object indicates “good intentions,” is the general public (who will most likely never get a chance to use the pen) led to believe that an emblem of promising peace has sprung to life from a tired mark of war? Through the deliberate purging of its essence, the bulletpen has been rendered harmless. A hollow bullet is suspended from its role in combat yet has been given the weight of martyrdom. And as the campaign expands to schools, what can the Balígrafo want from the children asked to draw or write stories with these pens?



Figure 1. The *Baligrafo* (bulletpen) in the hands of Secretary General of the Organization of American States Luis Almagro. Photograph by Juan Manuel Herrera/OAS. Washington DC, 2016. Courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons.

In accordance with Gui Bonsiepe's position on the virtues of design, discussed in his essay of the same name, we can consider the virtue of "otherness" (including care for the "other") to be embedded in the bulletpen. Today, Colombia wants to recognize the neglected victims (the others) of its 50-year war. They are now honored and remembered through the inherent power of the pen to change all narratives.⁶ In the hands of policy makers and artists, this small army of Colombian pens will attempt to fulfill its present mission according to Bonsiepe, who suggests objects of this nature have "virulent political implications... the power to participate in the determination of one's own future"⁷—a most unusual task for a pen. Of his *virtues*, Bonsiepe also emphasizes the need for design to have "concern for the public domain."⁸ This illuminates the object's role in the peace mission, for political commitment engenders "care for details and quality of public service."⁹

Commenting on the peace process, author Celso Roman assured readers that "we are no longer shooting to kill, but to create and live."¹⁰ Amidst moral

standing, the bulletpen mediates in the spotlight between the haves and the have-nots who barter with the currency of power and peace. On October 2, after a failed referendum vote (however, only by a small margin), Colombian citizens rejected the first draft of the signed deal. Ironically tarnished by the uncertainty of the setback in the peace process, the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize was announced on October 7. The Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded this distinction “for his resolute efforts to bring the country’s more than 50-year-long war to an end.”¹¹ Following its debut on the world stage in Havana, the Balígrafo appeared front-and-center in Cartagena, Colombia, for the signing of a revised peace deal. Timochenko began his remarks with a declaration of peace: “Let words be the only weapons of Colombians.”¹² The Balígrafo has agency as it carries out the mission of introducing forgiveness and healing while rewriting the narrative of peace for the collective memory of Colombia. ■

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Endnotes

¹ Adriana Lucía Puentes, “Conozca La Historia Del Balígrafo Con El Que Se Firmó La Paz,” *El Heraldo*, June 24, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.co/nacional/las-balas-escribieron-nuestro-pasado-la-educacion-escribira-nuestro-futuro-santos>. [In Spanish]

² Ibid.

³ Cannes Lion Archive, “Winners and Shortlists: The Bulletpen” PR Category, www.canneslionsarchive.com/winners/entry/770836/the-bulletpen.

⁴ Muere El Escritor Fernando Soto Aparicio,” *CNN Español*, May 2, 2016, <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/05/02/muere-el-escritor-colombiano-fernando-soto-aparicio/>. [In Spanish]

⁵ Puentes, “Conozca La Historia.”

⁶ Gui Bonsiepe, “Some Virtues of Design”, paper presented at the Design beyond Design Symposium, Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, November 1997, www.guibonsiepe.com/pdf/virtues.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Puentes, “Conozca La Historia.”

¹¹ “Press Release: The Nobel Peace Prize for 2016,” *Nobel Prize*, October 7, 2016 https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2016/press.html

¹² “Colombia, FARC Rebels Sign Revised Peace Deal,” *CNN*, November 25, 2016 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/24/americas/colombia-farc-peace-deal-signed/>.