

TO ARRIVE LATE IS ARRIVE JUST TIME

Ramón Castillo, Santiago, Chile, 2007

'Visuality, unlike race or gender or class, has no innate politics. Like language, it is a medium in which politics (and identification, desire, and sociability) are conducted.'
W.J.T. Mitchell¹

In effect, it is in visuality that the gestures of liberty and repression are exercised, it is in the visual that the representation of resistance in an adverse medium takes place, for it is in this way that the visuality with which a dominant system exercises its authority is subverted. Authority is manifested in visible zones and with the codes specific to the social, cultural and media realm, and the way of subverting these is precisely by altering, subverting, reconstructing and manipulating these in a different, unexpected, unpredictable formal and semiotic direction. When a dictatorship or a totalitarian regime imposes itself on a country, it does so with all the symbolic, real and mediatic 'weapons' at its disposal. Violence is filtered through the sieve of permanent censorship and hypocrisy; dictators know that violence redounds to their discredit, so they seek to manipulate everything in order to present a friendly face. Given that the efficiency of a regime is measured by its capacity to control events, in principle we can identify three modes of action with regard to the cultural scenario: repression, promotion and tolerance.

Where there is repression, there always remains a tough root, hard to get rid of: sometimes what is eradicated 'at a stroke' is converted into a myth or a legend that tends to grow in time and in the memory. On the other hand, what is promoted comes to install itself in the visuality of the market and of the internal consumers in a highly effective and almost normal way, since the press and the media in general publicize such work and even manage to give it an image of stability and cultural richness. These are 'courtier' artists to the extent that they have been absorbed by the regime in its complacency at the likely risk, and even though some of them may be dissidents, after a while they manage to blend in thanks to the 'stability' and projection offered by the context. Finally there is the art that the dictatorship 'tolerates', with a tolerance that is a mix of indifference and oversight. We might say that these artists and works are accepted because they are not understood, because their forms and messages are not legible on a first reading and they are regarded as 'cryptic' and 'elitist', so they arouse no enthusiasm or interest other than as mere statistics. These artists are thus 'invisible' and non-existent as long as their messages are not ciphered and recognized by the oppressive regime. In this sector there is no institutional support, still less the conditions for the distribution and reception of their proposals, and it is often international art events or the worldwide networks of curators, historians and artists that put the work of this sector into circulation.

When it comes to resituating these practices there is an urgent need to recover the context and the conditions in which they were produced, the alternative to this being the lobotomizing of the works and their artists; at times, indeed, the works even tend to 'burn out' before mistaken readings and irresponsible museography. One recent example of this has been Documenta in Kassel, at which works by three Chilean artists were presented entirely without context, forcing them to take on an autonomous 'aesthetics', the most extreme case being the presentation of the work of Lotty Rosenfeld, about which I will say more in due course.

So, then, a visual proposal seeking to recover in some way the political and social context in which the emergence of this art of resistance came about in Chile will be through the gaze of the 'subject' —photographer, journalist, visual artist—who remained attentive to the development of the social, cultural and political repression that Chile underwent between 1973 and 1989. With this in mind, rather than a documentary or journalistic compilation, I am going to present a selection of images by Chilean photographers from a publication entitled *Chile From Within*. The images reflect almost the whole of the systematic public repression exercised between 1973 and 1988.²



Fot. Luis Poirot. 1971



Fot. Luis Poirot. 16 sept. 1973

It was in this adverse context of extermination, repression and torture of the whole 'social body' of Chile that an art of resistance developed at the level of discourse and of practices. This was a form of artistic production that installed itself in the fissure of the Pinochet government, in a zone that the military regime found it impossible to identify and classify — a zone of mobility and dissidence dominated by a permanent 'subsistence and nomadism', in the midst of a regime that systematically monitored and instilled fear in the whole country. In its deeds it developed an urgent and spontaneous political activism that reacted and defended the freedom of expression, the need to take a stand and the struggle for human rights. This countercultural territory was identified as *Escena de Avanzada* — 'Advance Scene'.³ The appropriation of the jargon of combat served to install the first form of resistance, since the notion of 'vanguard' was used initially to identify the artists that led this 'clash' with the system, and at the same time a scene was proclaimed that was fully conscious that there was a scene of people from different disciplines that shared the urgency of a protest that was subsequently channelled through furtive gestures, art actions, performances, poetry readings and interventions in the private and public space. The results of these initiatives were works of an ephemeral, subtle, precarious nature; of brief signs that were capable of mobilizing subjects that were conscious of their historic role, so there was preoccupation with working at all times with a view to the photographic record and underground publication, thus constituting an archive of the resistance from the mid 70s and through to the late 80s.



The chronology and the context possess a substantial value, in so far as we are dealing with a form of art practice that within the system of the arts at the Western level had already emerged historically during the 1950s and 60s. In historicist terms, conceptual art in Chile 'arrived late', because though there were radical actions before the military coup, these were isolated proto-conceptual acts, while what was developed from 1975 on was the result of the struggle that some artists waged to recover the symbolic space of culture, to restore its language to the social body (body, letter and meaning), the casting into crisis of the traditional art 'promoted' by the dictatorship through the investigation of the conceptual and formal limits of art. The fact that conceptual practices and the dematerialization and delocalization of the work of art and the 'institution' of art made it possible to carry out actions in time and in specific places ('site specific') was the demonstration that despite the remoteness and isolation to which Chile was subjected, a projective and visionary space was being generated in which the heroic and desperate response of a group of artists installed in the fringes or the trench opposed a predatory, cruel and impenetrable system by giving rise to 'activist art' and an 'institutional critique',⁴ which if we think of them in the international context of today constitute a foretaste of the discourse and the practices of the postmodern critical and activist art developed in the United States and Europe as of the 1980s.



The Colectivo de Acciones de Arte 'Art Actions Collective' (CADA) was an interdisciplinary group of Chilean artists created in 1979 in order to encourage reflection on the dilemma of Art and Politics. To this end, CADA concentrated on structuring grassroots interventions that aimed to set in motion a new aesthetic proposal with which to reformulate the art circuits that existed under the dictatorship. The group sought to multiply the channels of diffusion and transform them into supports for art discourse.

Para no morir de hambre en el arte ('Not to die of hunger in art') was mounted in October 1979 and took the metaphor of milk —sign of whiteness, of hunger and of need— as the starting point of a progressive work that ranged from recording to the magazines of political analysis, by way of the segregated bodies of the most disadvantaged inhabitants of the city, and culminated in the parking of milk trucks in front of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, where for a few hours they indicated that Chilean art was in crisis.

Inversión de escena ('Scene inversion') was a popular action work carried out on the 17th of October 1979 that sought to evidence, from the art sphere, the shortages and the violence of a tightly controlled and threatened country. The milk trucks were established as a critical citation of military technology, lined up in front of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. This was closed off with a white tarpaulin as resistance to and evidence of the repressive political situation. The white indicated that the art was out there, diluted in the city, clandestine.

¡Ay Sudamérica! ('Oh! South America!') was staged on the 12th of June 1981, when six small planes in perfect formation flew over the city of Santiago, dropping down on its most populous areas 400,000 pamphlets concerning the relationship between art and society. The pamphlet read: 'When you walk across these places and look up at the sky under the snow-covered peaks, this place is recognized as the space of our lives: brown skin, stature and language, thought...'; 'we are artists, but each of us that works toward the expansion, even if only mental, of our spaces of life is an artist...'



The CADA group culminated its grassroots interventions in 1983 with the striped mural *NO +*, its most ambitious project for the expansion of the spaces of art, and the most socially effective, with the support of a considerable number of artists from various disciplines. With *NO +*, prior to the Chilean plebiscite of 1988, the group concluded a risky, plural and surprising popular art project.

The CADA group was dissolved in 1985.

Two members

Diamela Eltit (1949). Between 1980 and 1982 this Chilean writer and essayist carried out the action *Zona del Dolor I y III* ('Pain Zone I and III'). In *Pain Zone I* she addressed the relationship between literature and sexuality. She converted the humble brothel as a complex space of sexual traffic into a site of literary activity through a reading contaminated by the bodies that encounter one another and share a ambiguous and fluctuating situation. The performance was staged in the most peripheral prostitution neighbourhood of the city of Santiago: the projection of slides of the writer's face onto the walls of the buildings was followed by a literary reading (from her novel *Lumpérica*) and subsequent washing of the streets of the neighbourhood. *Pain Zone III enacts* the city and its bodies, their encounter, their caress, their challenge and their erotics. At the same time, the work maintains an ironical relation with the 'Hollywood kiss' in positioning itself outside of the dominant canons and stereotypes, as a street encounter between Diamela Eltit and a homeless man is sealed with a kiss.

Lotty Rosenfeld (1943) commenced the urban action *Una milla de cruces en el pavimento* ('A Thousand Miles of Crosses on the Roadway') in 1979. The sign of the cross was created by the intersecting of two lines: the first imposed by a code of social regulation and the second proposed by art as a mode of subversion and resistance to a public ordinance. By introducing the 'crisis' into the interior of the traffic regulations, the work incited people to rethink their critical situation in relation to conventional codes, thus exploding their supposedly 'natural' character. At Documenta in Kassel the same year Rosenfeld was to present her intervention in the public thoroughfare, but it was dismantled by city council officials the day before the inauguration.



CADA, No +, 1983



Lotty Rosenfeld, Mil Millas de Cruces, 1979



Lotty Rosenfeld. Mil millas de Cruces sobre el Pavimento, Santiago, 1979.

ABSTRACT

Despite the time lag with which new artistic tendencies and movements manifest themselves in the Third World, in Chile in particular there have been tendencies that, as a result of the political and social context generated by the dictatorship, gave rise to an art that in a certain sense anticipated the current tendencies, in which Activism and Institutional Critique were prioritized. During the military dictatorship in Chile between 1973 and 1989 there developed an 'avant-garde' art that radicalized the forms of representation and of traditional art and in so doing established kinds of practice and discourse that were subversive both in form and in concept. Though the social and political context was very complex, and hazardous for those who dissented, there were artists and collectives capable of engaging in art activism and at the same time establishing the bases for an 'institutional critique' of considerable symbolic power. This battle of codes, symbols and images was waged in the realm of visibility, since this was the form through which the dictatorial regime sought to maintain and perpetuate itself. At the same time there was a social and political context that can be seen in synthesis in the photographs published in the book *Chile From Within*. This was the context in which there emerged one of the collectives that led this subversive reaction—aesthetic, ethical and political—against the military regime: the CADA group (Art Actions Collective).

NOTES

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Interdisciplinary and Visual Culture', *Art Bulletin* No. 77 (Dec. 1995), pp. 540-541.
2. Photographers who contributed to the publication: Paz Errzauriz, Alejandro Hoppe, Alvaro Hoppe, Helen Hughes, Jorge Ianiszewski, Hector Lopez, Kena Lorenzini, J.D. Marinello, Susan Meiselas, Christian Montecinos, Marcelo Montecino, Oscar Navarro, Claudio Perez, Sergio Perez, Luis Poirot, Paulo Slachevsky, Luis Weinstein and Oscar Wittke. Texts: Marco Antonio de la Parra and Ariel Dorfman.
3. A notion put forward by the French theorist, resident in Chile, Nelly Richard. Her texts, such as *Margins and Institutions* and *Estratificación de los Márgenes*, have made the trajectory of this artistic and cultural movement more widely known. She has identified the leading figures and carried out the necessary historiographical research to profile the scene.
4. Among the wealth of bibliographical references that can be consulted on the website www.textosdearte.cl are *Manuscritos*, 1975 (the magazine folded after the first issue); two texts by Nelly Richard and Ronald Kay on nine drawings by Dittborn, 1976; *Final de pista*, Eugenio Dittborn, 1977; *Cuerpo correccional*, Nelly Richard, 1980; *El espacio de acá*, Ronald Kay, 1980; *Fallo fotográfico*, Eugenio Dittborn, 1981; *Una mirada sobre el arte en Chile*, Nelly Richard, 1981, and *Inter/medios*, Justo Pastor Mellado and Nelly Richard, 1981.