

“The relationship between culture and historic reality is the essential issue of manifestations during the last fifteen years in Chile.” [1] These words, spoken by Pablo Oyarzún and published five years ago, sum up the nature of visual arts production in Chile at the time. They were included among the texts of a catalogue that helped promote the South American country’s art in Europe. Two years later (in 1991) Fátima Bercht, a curator of the Chilean exhibition at the American Society in New York, repeated a similar verdict while presenting another group of artists of the same origin: “The works also reflect the artists’ strong sense of commitment to their cultural, social and historic context...” [2].

In keeping with these quotations, the first thing to stand out when evaluating Chilean art of the last two decades is the interaction between the coordinates Art and Society, independent of the linguistic orientation adopted by the different generations of artists.

Chilean artists’ interest in reflecting a wide range of social issues (i.e. local, global and basic human conflicts) is both proof and product of an obviously reflective endeavor. This analytical attitude has allowed current issues to achieve a hierarchy in the artistic environment. At the same time, the artistic solutions reached were in response to the demands of history and/or artistic trends; in Chile, due to a series of political circumstances, they acquired particular properties.

Several factors have given Chilean art both its interrogative power in questioning the national and Latin American situation as well its wide range of commentary.

# Culture and History in Contemporary Chilean Art

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PRIETO

Within the conglomerate of countries that comprise the American sub-continent, Chile has had a significant role in the 80’s, directing avant-garde thought in terms of ascertaining the keys to our current culture, art and identity.

I am not going to argue as to what have been their main contributions in this matter. It will suffice to state that texts (about the “Appropriation of Latin American Thought”, “Identity and Postmodernism in Latin America” or “The crisis of originals and the revenge of copies” (among others) are required reading in order to understand art and contemporary behaviour in this hemisphere, as well as shedding light on the eurocentric-periphery debate from a postmodern position.

Undoubtedly such a level of theory, with its implicit deepening of criteria, provided the conceptual tools for the analysis of the different types of eventual

problems. In an artistic level they made possible a coherent artistic materialisation of multiple spiritual concerns. In some cases, an excess of theory influenced the expressive density of conceptual productions, and even beyond Pinochet’s dictatorship when the artist was forced to hide the real message in works that of a sophisticated morphology.

Compared to other Latin American nations, Chile has historically counted on a high standard of educational and cultural institutions in the teaching and promotion of contemporary art. The Escuela de Bellas Artes de la Universidad de Chile [School of Fine Arts of the University of Chile], a centre in charge of the academic formation of artists and the focus of the main controversies having to do with visual arts, and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Fine Arts Museum], a prestigious institution and active supporter of emerging generations, are responsible for the development of the visual arts. Both (as well as the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo [Museum of Contemporary Art] attached to the Universidad de Chile, which closed following the 1983 earthquake and is currently re-opened) suffered from fluctuations in the level of state-support. This was particularly weakened during the last military regime; the Escuela de Bellas Artes de la Universidad de Chile was closed until 1983 and there was a subsequent shift of the artistic movement toward private institutions.

During those years, commercial galleries were created in tandem with the nation’s strategic programme for restoration. Private industry, in accord

with the neoliberal political shift, played an active role in the recovery of the artistic space, providing economic support and grants between the end of the 70's and the early 80's.

The Escuela de Bellas Artes and the museums mentioned earlier operated as the infrastructure that provided the discussion of ideas and the development of artistic proposals. Faced with the new dictatorial context and regardless of the financial sponsorship granted to the artistic spaces, artists did not remain passive before the loss of civic values. "But this burst of exhibitionism could not hide the deteriorated countenance of the country: some of the artists were not blind to this fact, refusing to renounce or sell their convictions to the new patronage: in various contests organised during those years, the artists presented controversial works that seriously threatened those responsible for their selection and reception of awards; controversies and arguments arose which, in general, despite all of this, ended with the most disputed works hanging on the gallery walls." [3]

There is substantial information with regard to criticism — not in its abundance but in the richness of its contents, detached from foreign schematic systems and easy descriptions — of the current Chilean visual art scene through material published primarily during the 80's. It is thanks to this information that we know that the arts had a zealous following among critics, like an active chronicle installed in the centre of the events and in constant dialogue with the subjects. "Those who have written during the past two decades are not specialists, but their work has been pioneering in the establishment of the foundations of an autonomous critical discussion. It has taken place regardless of institutions and has been strongly



Virginia Errázuriz.

anchored in the various artistic practices that comprise Chilean visual arts." [4]

From the catalogue texts of individual and group and such as "Viva Chile" and especially "Cirugía Plástica" (both of which were shown outside the country during the second half of the 80's) to various publications — including daily newspapers such as the Revista Chilena de Investigaciones Estéticas — critics such as Justo Pastor Mellado, Nelly Richard, Pablo Oyarzún, Ivan Ivelic, Gaspar Calaz have commented on the milestones and myths of the artistic scene. They have shown both a profound sense of judgement with regards to the historic reckoning of the last decades and an eloquence in deciphering the aesthetic production, the complexity of the visual discourses and the release of messages of the works exhibited.

The panorama of Chilean art is quite heterogeneous. However, the avant-garde groups that have led the way in each phase have been in constant confrontation with the critics. The polemic has been fruitful, giving feedback to both sides and favourably strengthening the artistic work. Such criticism influenced the historic process, creating a constant critical reflection on the aspects of reality alluded to by art.

The critics never cease to recognise the role played by the FLASCO Seminars, and the indebted interpretations of its profile, where art, criticism and the social sciences joined hands.

Few countries have questioned in

such a radical manner the identity of Latin American art as has Chile, even to the point of conditioning a priori its artistic production under the effects of what was called "bad conscience". Several Chilean authors have written on the subject, but the clearest example is Bernardo Subercasseaux. "Bad conscience" is known as "the permanent syndrome of guilt for not being able to exercise the practice art in sources that are completely original, autonomous and autochthonous." [5]

The intention was to overcome the stereotype of artistic parrots often given to the art of what are considered to be "peripheral countries", with the reprocessing of loans in a context as different as the Chilean one, critically and creatively recontextualising the transferred resources and concepts. This implied that the artist stress a conscious emphasis in his contingent reality, finding the exploration of his own surroundings and the representation of his problematics, the seal of originality.

Following the military coup, the process of critical revision in the arts was reactivated and the implications of the so called "bad conscience" — as the methodology that the Escuela de Bellas Artes put into practice before being shut down — only this time under a different focus.

Due to the censorship imposed by the dictatorship, the artist was forced to work with inherited expressive structures



Arturo Duclos, *Adiós amigo Warhola, te fuiste sin haberme conocido*, 1990.

and with a selection of signifiers in order to hide the true meaning of the content with subtlety, referring to the social body and to historic events in a general manner. “ (...) now it was necessary to act in a restrictive climate that obliged the artist to veil or transform art that contained accusations and testimonials. This unseen phenomena demanded a rethinking of the artistic mechanisms that diverted the meaning of a single direction. This very issue caused several artists to reject the institutional codes, to question the meanings in use and to feign ignorance of an inheritance linked to a specific historic and cultural context which they had endorsed.” [6]

The group of artists who broke away, who accomplished the programmatic reassessment of idioms in search of heterogeneity of discourse, who dedicated themselves to stimulating critical reflection, was known to everybody as “Escena de Avanzada” (The Avant-Garde Scene) and was dominated by Nelly Richard.

Their work provoked a series of controversies in the cultural and academic environments in general. According to some observers, several of the artistic practices that were flowering complicated the recognition of criticism’s efforts in the Chilean intellectual area in correspondence to some of the contextual demands. The structural sophistication of some of the works of the “Escena de Avanzada” were questioned in other fields, particularly in that the object under critical study — the artistic model — was too obscure to make a social statement. The critics themselves stated that it was the socio-economic defects of the works in question that limited their influence within the national community. But in a joint theoretical analysis Nelly Richard pointed out: “ (...) in their respective processes of emergency (the

avant-garde) or re-articulation (the social sciences), both sectors represented a common trait that underlines their novelty in the progressive scene: for both sectors, the need for social adaptation or re-adaptation of their instruments and intellectual-development circuitry and of cultural production, was motivated with the crisis of discourse that forced them into theoretical reformulation. This reformulation was followed through by the inauguration of tranferential handling of a double body of reference (roughly speaking, postmarxism in social sciences, poststructuralism in the theory of art) that argued among themselves for contemporaneity of thought regarding the same horizon of problems (...).” [7] The Escena de Avanzada developed its creative potential primarily from the sidelines. Throughout the 80’s — a decade marked by the perpetuity of the government until the referendum in 1989 — its activity was of a critical nature, reactive on the whole, heterogenous in works and investigations within which certain political nuances stood out, more in the reaction than in the generality of the content of the works.

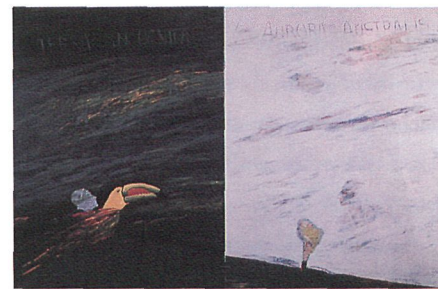
Their answer to this new situation and its creative way of expanding in a politically authoritarian context gives the Escena an avant-garde reputation. As Pablo Oyarzún would say, “faced with the historically new, the result is the artistically new.”

(...) It is the first time that our country has produced such a solid collective art scene, unheard of in its rigor, its critical level and the multiplicity of its operations of language as well as for its radical dismantling of institutional notions of representation (...). [8]

Thus between the late 70’s — mainly in 1977 — and the early 80’s works were presented by Catalina Parra, Carlos Leppe, the CADA group (Diamela

Eltit, Lotty Rosenfeld, Raúl Zurita), Eugenio Dittborn, Carlos Altamirano, Juan Dávila, Mario Soro, Gonzalo Mezza, Alfredo Jaar, Arturo Duclos, Virginia Errázuriz, Francisco Brugnoli and Gonzalo Díaz.

As the historic circumstances that generated this type of proposal evolved, some of these artists moved the lens of their contemplation to more plural objectives, less focused on the Chilean national drama that had inspired them, preserving the experimental character and the restrained strength of their works until this day.



Eugenio Tellez. *Terra Incognita/Aurora Australis/pour Stephan Herhlim.*

At the same time, the typical visual structure of conceptualism made way for more two-dimensional works, still elevating the reflection implicit in the exhibition of ideas and messages.

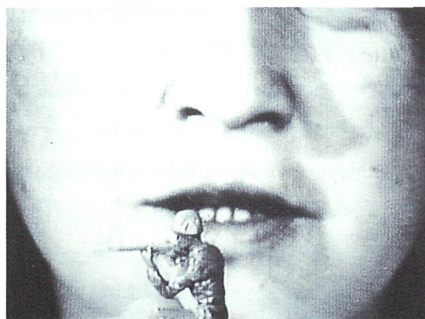
Since their eclosion as an avant-garde, each artist has developed specific proposals. I will highlight the work of CADA with themes such as the body and the urban plan, with the intervention of traffic signs and streets. Dittborn introduces these themes in his airmail postcard paintings in order to insist on the current problem of identity; Carlos Altamirano in the eclecticism of artistic and cultural sources and the relationship between materials, signs and codes; Gonzalo Mezza employs electronically reproduced images, using the iconic repetition (fragmented or otherwise) of art historical masterpieces; so does

Alfredo Jaar, showing emerging conflicts in the Third World in confrontation with other contexts and the tensions of the groups of power in what almost looks like a movie set; Virginia Errázuriz, in whose installations there is an explosion of connotations regarding objects, transmitting social messages through sophisticated installations; Carlos Leppe uses the body's expressivity in performances in order to focus numberless human conflicts; Gonzalo Díaz, who ironises on painting, popular myths and the mediocrity of the archetypes of Chilean society as a means to explore the relationships between art and power; Juan Dávila with his sardonic references of the obscene and his declarations on social ailments such as AIDS; Brugnoli, who carries out a creative feat of ideological density making use of formal and conceptual artifices; Catalina Parra, whose "re-constructions" use collage and photo montage from newspaper and magazine cut-outs to attract attention to current global problems such as inflation and the external debt; and Arturo Duclos, an original painter who explores the semantics of historical and political symbols, unpopular objects and frozen objects in order to create an expressive and controversial painting style.

One must not forget the video movement in operation during recent years. Social themes stand out, involving artists such as Gloria Camiruaga, Pablo Lavín, Bernardo León and Nestor Olhagaray. And the exceptional photography of Paz Errázuriz, with its alienated surroundings and characters, cheap joints, tango corners, hustlers and loners that prevail in the sidelines of Third World Latin American.

Finally, it is essential to add that although the Escena de Avanzada played

an unquestionable leading role (artistic), the Chilean artistic scene is in reality more diverse and is composed more than the group's ex-members. During the 80's there was a flourish — under the influence of the transavant-garde fashion and the important media coverage it received, the reappearance of a few artists of that style and the strong tradition with which expression counted on in academic environments — of a trend aimed towards the recuperation of



Gloria Camiruaga. *Popsicles*.

the hegemonic aspect of painting, an expression that today enjoys preeminence in Chile.

Within this group we can refer to Samy Bennayor and Bororo, both essentially transavant-gardists; Eugenio Téllez and Zañartu, both with a sustained history in the trade; those who returned from abroad such as Balmes, Nuñez and Antúnez; and those who live in the United States, such as Frigerio and Tacla.

Although the painters show no concern with the recontextualising transfers and have no intention of creating a crisis in the artistic structure that they have adopted, this does not necessarily imply that the content of their work is exempt from social issues. For example, Frigerio's works are based on the cultural and historical alienation of the Latin American immigrant.

Years after the events, my basic premise remains valid.

It would be a mistake to think that the purpose of this analysis of Chilean art is to defend the postulates of vulgar sociology, or to try to characterise it under such a narrow focus.

It has been explained above how various factors, from the formative, the systematic, the theoretical and cultural to the socio-political — with their specific and all-important weight in Chile — influenced the production of a certain type of art. A contemplative, critical art, one that without retreating from the urgencies of the historical moment nor from the demands of the context, remained true to its internal logic. Hence many of the works produced by those of the Escena de Avanzada or Post-Avanzada, such as the artistic responses that "subjectively" express their joint relationship with reality, are more subtle, ambitious and complex than sociology could ever wish.

#### NOTES

- [1] Oyarzún R., Pablo. "Parapadeo y Piedad", in the catalogue of the *Cirugía Plástica, Konzepte Zeitgenössischer Kunst Chile 1980-1989* exhibition, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, NGBK, A.G., Chile, 1989, p. 30.
- [2] Bercht, Fátima. "Introducción" from the catalogue of the *Contemporary Art from Chile* exhibition, America Society, New York, 1991, p. 6.
- [3] Ivelic, Milan. "El Arte en Chile. Tres lustros de aislamiento," in *Arte Colombia*, Bogotá (#3), February 1990, p.44-47.
- [4] Mellado, Justo Pastor. "Breve nota sobre pintura chilena: 1950-88", from the catalogue of the *Cirugía Plástica* exhibition, Op. cit., p. 6.
- [5] Ivelic, Milan. Op. cit., p. 46.
- [6] Op. cit., p. 47.
- [7] Richard, Nelly. "Sobre arte y política(s): Contraoficialidad, poder y lenguajes," from the catalogue of the *Cirugía Plástica* exhibition, op., cit., p. 43.
- [8] Muñoz, Gonzalo. "El gesto del otro. Arte / Política en Chile (1975-1985)," from the catalogue of the *Cirugía Plástica* exhibition, op. cit., p. 22.