

Dislocación—Background to an Exhibition

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When Ingrid Wildi Merino approached us in September 2008 to ask whether Kunstmuseum Bern would stage her upcoming exhibition in Switzerland, we agreed without hesitation. The list of artists and authors she had put together for *Dislocación* in Santiago de Chile in 2010 promised high standards and credible critical treatment of a burning issue of the day. The project also offered us the opportunity to experiment with a new approach to curating, where each work was produced specially for the exhibition following a phase of profound artistic research led by a clearly framed question.

Artistic Research Projects

Curator Ingrid Wildi Merino invited Chilean and European artists to explore the theme of *dislocación* (dislocation, displacement, uprooting), using Chile as their example. As well as taking a critical look at the state of the country as it marked two centuries of independence and examining its (cultural) condition two decades after the official end of the Pinochet dictatorship, they also set out to interpret economic, social, and geopolitical developments in a defined “case study.”

The works reflect Chilean history. Camilo Yañez’s two-part video installation *Estadio nacional, 11.09.09 Santiago, Chile* shows footage of the national stadium—empty for renovation work—on September 11, 2009, the anniversary of the military takeover of 1973 (ill. pp. ##–##). This is the same stadium where thousands were imprisoned, beaten, tortured, and killed in the weeks and months following the coup. Voluspa Jarpa’s book edition and

installation *La biblioteca de la no-historia de Chile* draws on a digital archive of 22,000 declassified source documents on the American-supported coup released by the U.S. Department of State starting in 1999 (pp. ##-##).¹ Gaps in the historiography remain, but Jarpa's four books leave no doubt as to the magnitude of U.S. intervention in Chilean affairs. Lotty Rosenfeld's video *Cuenta regresiva* (pp. ##-##) uses theatrical psychological portraits scripted by Diamela Eltit to reveal the country's post-traumatic condition in the aftermath of dictatorship, while Alfredo Jaar's installation *La cordillera de los Andes (CB)* (pp. ##-##) about Clotario Blest commemorates this important trade unionist and his socialist legacy against the backdrop of the current Chilean government's rightward swing.

Recognition of the value of art as a research tool in other fields is a tendency that emerged during the mid-nineties, when growing interest in the service-providing functions of art led the natural sciences to tap its visualizing competence for representing complex structures and relationships. More recently art has begun to move beyond merely serving illustrative purposes in the natural sciences, provoking a closer examination of the knowledge-generating epistemological potential of art itself and its performative processes.² Art historian Elke Bippus writes: "Unlike science, artistic research looks back at a history that is always returning to that which escapes terminological and methodological definition, and plays on the possibility of expression by experimenting with the medialities within which it operates. Artistic practice is thus reminiscent of something that Heinrich von Kleist identifies in his essay "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts Whilst Speaking": the process of half-conscious formation of ideas, which is initiated by the subject but only in the course of articulation completed and given a social context. Precisely because art and artistic research

¹ U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesman, three press releases: *Chile Declassification Project*, June 30, 1999, online edition: <http://foia.state.gov/Press/6-30-99ChilePR.asp>; *Release of Newly Declassified and Other Documents Related to Events in Chile From 1968–78*, October 8, 1999, online edition: <http://foia.state.gov/Press/10-8-99ChilePR.asp>; *Chile Declassification Project: Final Release*, November 13, 2000, online edition: <http://foia.state.gov/Press/11-13-00ChilePR.asp>.

² Elke Bippus, ed., *Kunst des Forschens: Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens* (Zurich and Berlin, 2009), p. 19.

reflect performative, medial, social, and also economic influences, they challenge conventional scientific practice.”³ The exhibition *Dislocación*, in which the fourteen artistic research projects culminate, allows its subject to be experienced aesthetically, through the senses, while simultaneously setting up an analytical encounter with the associated questions and theses.

The structure of the project as a whole is that of a thematically ordered exhibition—or a biennial—and it made use of several different venues in Santiago de Chile: classical exhibition spaces like art museums, galleries, bookstores, and a studio cinema as well as places occupying a special place in the city’s political history. Juan Castillo’s *Campo de luz* (ill. pp. ##–##) was shown at Señal 3 La Victoria, a communal media college and television channel in the working class quarter of La Victoria that teaches local residents media skills and offers them the opportunity to broadcast their own contributions on the public network. Another project dealing with the flow of public information is Mario Navarro’s *Radio ideal* (pp. ##–##).

Other venues included the newly founded Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (Salvador Allende Museum of Solidarity) housed since 2006 in a building once used by the Chilean secret police and the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights), in which the epoch of dictatorship has been processed and made accessible in exhibitions since the beginning of 2010. These institutions provided space for *Dislocación* to reflect on the current situation in Chile through critical and committed art, treating the country as a case study for the worldwide impact of neoliberal economic policies and their effects on the population in the form of growing social inequality.⁴ The rising cost of

³ Translated from *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴ “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. . . . But beyond these tasks the state should not venture.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, 2005), p. 2.

housing in Chile illustrates the development. Whereas the wealthy middle classes can still afford to buy a home—as seen in the installation *invest & drawwipe* by RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co) (pp. ##–##)—the less affluent must depend on social housing and put up with the city government awarding construction contracts to the lowest bidder. The resulting housing is but a poor alternative to the slums,⁵ as described in the installation *Decreto público no habitable* by 000 Estudio (pp. ##–##) or in the example of the failed housing project *Made in Chile* by Josep-María Martín (pp. ##–##).⁶

Neoliberal Case Study

Chile is the perfect place to examine the effects of neoliberalism because when General Augusto Pinochet seized power he made it one of the first countries in the world to run its economy on neoliberal lines. Following the advice of the “Chicago Boys”⁷ and the economic theories of Milton Friedman,⁸ the military junta suppressed all the social movements initiated by Salvador Allende, broke up the political organizations of the left, and destroyed all forms of grassroots organization including the communal health centers in the slums. The labor market was “liberated” of any kind of legal regulation or institutional restriction and the trade unions were abolished. All of deposed President Salvador Allende’s nationalization measures were reversed, with public property and natural resources turned over to private ownership, often in violation of the rights of the indigenous population. Social insurance was privatized,

⁵ See also David Harvey on slums as a consequence of neoliberalism, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ On the effect of globalization on urban housing in Santiago de Chile, Axel Borsdorf and Hugo Romero write: “The tendency for the upper and upper middle classes to secrete themselves away in ‘bastions of wealth’ is just as detrimental to communal coexistence as the ecological problems that office skyscrapers and hillside development pose for air circulation. Although there are winners of globalization whose radius of opportunity may even allow them to convert dedicated agricultural land into luxury housing, the majority of the population of course belong to the losers of globalization and are forced to accept significant impairments of quality of life (air and water pollution, time lost in traffic congestion, shortage of urban green space, and growing social barriers).” Translated from Axel Borsdorf and Hugo Romero, “Chile – Globalisierte Raumentwicklung und Geisteshaltung,” in *Lateinamerika im Umbruch: Geistige Strömungen im Globalisierungsstress*, ed. Axel Borsdorf, Gertrud Krömer, and Christof Parnreiter (Innsbruck, 2001), pp. 7–17, here p. 14.

⁷ For the story of the Chicago Boys, a group of Chilean economists who studied at the private Catholic University in Santiago before training under Friedman at the University of Chicago, see Harvey 2005 (see note 4), p. 8.

foreign direct foreign investment encouraged, and trade liberalized. Only copper mining remained in state ownership, its revenues flowing directly into the national treasury to stabilize the state budget.⁹ As the Chilean experiment shows, the blessings of capital accumulation spurred by forced privatization turn out to be extremely one-sided.¹⁰ The state, the country's elites, and foreign investors reaped the benefits of a redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, but the neoliberal turn exacerbated social inequality.¹¹

The developments described here for Chile were repeated across the world. Despite the widespread opinion that globalization made neoliberalism successful and inevitable,¹² its actual economic successes are have remained comparatively modest, especially as experience shows that the restitution of old economic elites and the creation of new ones is always accompanied by an expropriation of the working classes.¹³ Regressive redistribution of income and wealth are a central characteristic of neoliberalism. If the price of unrestricted mobility of financial capital and entrepreneurial freedom is driving peasants off their land as communal holdings are turned into private property, so be it. What ensues is an appropriation of assets (including natural resources) by colonial, neocolonial, and imperial means, and the monetization of commodity exchange. High interest rates, state debt, and credit systems with extremely destructive effects are common side-effects of neoliberalism, along with the

⁸ For which Friedman won the 1976 Nobel Prize in Economics.

⁹ On the strong but brief recovery of the Chilean economy and its failure in the Latin American debt crisis of 1982 see Harvey 2005 (see note 4), p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Manfred Mols speaks of our time as an "era of globalization." However fragmented the concept of globalization may become, as use of the term always reflects the knowledge, sensibilities, and preferences of its different users, the common denominator is always "the current process of human civilization on planet earth, namely, the totality of its interconnectedness, dependencies, and frictions. Whenever and wherever we choose to locate the start of this development, the historical substance of globalization is inseparable from a multidimensional and specific cultural diffusion that we call Westernness or better Westernization." Translated from Manfred Mols, "Bemerkungen zur Globalisierung in Lateinamerika," in Manfred Mols and Rainer Öhlschläger (eds.), *Lateinamerika in der Globalisierung (Politik in der Gegenwart, 6)* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 12.

¹³ As shown by the example of Sweden, where only moderate neoliberal principles were implemented. Harvey 2005 (see note 4), pp. 115–17.

erosion of state pensions, paid leave, and access to education and health services.¹⁴ The described interventions result in global expropriation, unemployment, and destruction of local economic structures. People emigrate and cultural identities are undermined.

Uprooting and displacement as forms of “dislocación” are recurring leitmotifs in the exhibition, for example in Ursula Biemann’s video essay and installation *Sahara Chronicle* (pp. ##–##), which addresses West African migration through the Sahara towards Europe, but also in Ingrid Wildi Merino’s video installation *Arica y norte de Chile no lugar y lugar de todos* (pp. ##–##), describing the fate of northern Chilean migrants. The pressure on the indigenous Mapuche population forcibly relocated to the south of the country by the Pinochet regime is conveyed in the video film *Y con ansias están esperando los barcos que traerán los nuevos hermanos a sus costas* by Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer (pp. ##–##).

Bernardo Oyarzún’s poetic language installation *Lengua izquierda* exposes the limits of understanding between the colonializing languages—German, English, and Spanish—and colonized Aymara, the language of the Mapuche (pp. ##–##). In rhythmic alternation the twelve monitors speak words from each of the different languages, symbolizing their co-existence but revealing nothing in the way of rules relating one to another and thus refusing any sense of meaning. Instead Oyarzún creates a self-contained and self-sufficient poetic space of sound and symbol where the languages enjoy equality.

“Doing Art Politically” (Thomas Hirschhorn)

The demand for art to promote social awareness by representing contemporary problems has been formulated recently by Catherine David, on the occasion of documenta X (1997), and again by Okwui Enwezor in connection with documenta 11 (2002). While Catherine David sought to document a politicization in contemporary art by examining different political

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 160.

strategies, languages, and territories, Okwui Enwezor added new continents to expand the Euro- and Amerocentric vista of contemporary art and addressed global artistic exchange under the keyword of “creolization.” In *Dislocación* Ingrid Wildi Merino takes up the thread of documenta X, which put relations between industrialized nations and newly industrializing countries in terms of contemporary art in a global framework.

Here it becomes clear that artists, through their means and forms of expression, conduct social, historical, and political field research, and that their artistic projects are also contributions to a better understanding of our time. Their findings are not merely represented with artistic means; they analyze, describe, and condense information and insights in such a way as to bring forth a greater awareness of the problem.¹⁵ The political force is produced by confronting the viewer with the issue in surroundings that promise the enjoyment of art, or as Juliane Rebentisch puts it: “Art’s chance to achieve a shift in consciousness potentially leading to political activity is not by creating a guilty conscience more effectively than, for example, a good newspaper editorial might do. Instead, by the structure of the experience, the potential of art to alter consciousness lies in the way it reflexively distances the familiar.”¹⁶

Thomas Hirschhorn also operates with reflexive distancing from the familiar in his *Made in Tunnel of Politics* (pp. ##–##), a cut-apart Ford pickup stuck back together slightly askew with adhesive tape. The model is the favorite vehicle of the Chilean upper middle classes, with its spacious load bed embodying material affluence and the “American way of life.” The brand of course originates with Henry Ford and the Fordist economic model which introduced the production line but also paid relatively high basic wages and sought lifelong social

¹⁵ It is outside the scope of this essay to show all the different ways art can be political. For an overview of the current discussion see Tobias Huber and Marcus Steinweg, eds., *Politics of Art (Inaesthetik 1)* (Zurich and Berlin, 2009), especially the contribution by Michael Hirsch, “Subversion und Widerstand: 10 Thesen über Kunst und Politik,” pp. 7–23.

¹⁶ Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 278.

partnership between capitalist and workers.¹⁷ Seen in that way, the assembly lines of the car factories are “political tunnels” where the principles of economic policy are put into practice.¹⁸ As the quote in the subhead suggests, Hirschhorn’s intention here is not to create political art but, alluding to Jean-Luc Godard’s famous essay,¹⁹ to make art political, for he was “only interested in what is really political, the political that implicates: Where do I stand? Where does the other stand? What do I want? What does the other want?”²⁰ Such questions are the basis for decisions based on the knowledge that ultimately everything is always political.

Relocating *Dislocación*

Transferring the exhibition to Kunstmuseum Bern has been a challenge. It meant re-articulating the theme along with its references to geopolitics and the national identity discourse and subjecting it to a re-reading. The artistic treatment of the housing question or migration in Chile inevitably raises questions as to the situation in Switzerland. But as different as the answers may turn out to be, *Dislocación* seeks to avoid thinking in purely black-and-white terms, and instead to define a place where contemporary issues can be raised and discussed. Because Ingrid Wildi Merino has invited artists from different cultural backgrounds to contribute, the “national” aspect of their respective standpoints play a less prominent role than the personal, subjective position of the individual, his or her stance or experience on the theme, and his or her artistic practice. The geographical focus (with all but

¹⁷ It comes as no surprise that the crisis of Fordism (a term coined by Marxists) at the end of the sixties coincides with the beginnings of neoliberalism.

¹⁸ On differentiating the relationship between art and politics see Thomas Hirschhorn, “Doing Art Politically: What Does This Mean?” in Huber and Steinweg 2009 (see note 15), pp. 71–82.

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Godard, “Was tun?” in *Godard/Kritiker: Ausgewählte Kritiken und Aufsätze über Film (1950–1970)*, selected and translated by Frieda Grafe (Munich, 1971), pp. 186–88. In this programmatic essay Godard distinguishes between making a film about a political subject and making a film political. The latter also involves, he says, “making a concrete analysis of a concrete situation” (p. 187), “understanding the laws of the objective world in order to change it actively” (p. 187), “saying say how things really are (Brecht)” (p. 187), and “being militant” (p. 188).

Ursula Biemann's work relating explicitly to Chile) creates an exhibition like a film essay, circling the theme and registering its different aspects, in order to point out the different facets. Works stamped by personal experience can certainly acquire a socio-political character, as we saw with the thematic group exhibition *Ego Documents* (2008) at Kunstmuseum Bern: "Such works lead to the essence of historical record keeping today and make a case for dispensing with the canonizing stories of the past and instead compiling history—if at all—based on thousands of individual voices."²¹

²⁰ Thomas Hirschhorn, "Doing Art Politically: What Does This Mean?" in Huber and Steinweg 2009 (see note 15), pp. 71–82, here p. 71.

²¹ Kathleen Bühler, "Between Big and Small History," in *Ego Documents: The Autobiographical in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bern (Heidelberg, 2008), p. 113.