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Displacing Meanings: Hidden Signs of Aesthetics in the Chilean Context

Abstract: The aim of this work is to reflect how Chilean visual arts worked in the context of dictatorship, which started with the coup of 1973. During this period, repressive politics censored most of the country's cultural and artistic manifestations. Several Chilean artists established the group C.A.D.A. (Collective Art Actions), the artworks of which established a renewal of the artistic scenario through forsaking the tradition, in terms of how to conceive the relation between artists and audience, how artistic institutions legitimate the artistic work and how material strategies of creation modified the conception of visual arts at that moment. Due to the repressive scenario, visual artistic production adhered to an overlap of meanings. Hiding connotations, through rewriting the signs that made up its own practices, was a strategy to survive the effects of the coup. This included the replacement of conventional materiality, the questioning of artistic institutions and a new transdisciplinary concept of visual arts production. From this temporal reference, this work describes how aesthetics can be thought of as an emancipatory knowledge. Its presence derives from formal institutional and discursive prescriptions to marginalized narratives that emerged and became visible during a troublesome period.

Keywords: Chilean visual arts context; aesthetical status; art under censorship; bodiness and representation; avant-garde in Chile.

An overview of aesthetics as a disciplinary field in a very specific context could be seen as a limited and provisional task. The complexity of thinking about artistic phenomena brings out some difficulties in terms of the comprehension of what is exhibited in artistic production but, more problematic than that, of how to pay attention to what is not said in the artistic images. This text aims to show a specific episode of what has been called the 'advanced scene'¹ or what has been understood as the *avant-garde* in the Chilean artistic context. This period took place during the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, responding to the dictatorship scenario caused by a military government. This overview was made trying to show how politics

¹ Nelly Richard, *Márgenes e instituciones* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2007), 15–23.

and visual arts were bound during that period in a sort of hidden alliance, starting a new kind of consciousness about the role of visual arts in Chile.

All along the second half of the 1960s, political processes ended up in the ascendancy to power of the socialist Salvador Allende. It was a unique scenario: for the first time, socialism was reached through a democratic election. The political map changed and the social demands became visible. “The state intervened in the production, distribution and financial sectors, imposed controls on prices, wages and interest rates, allocated credit on a selective basis, introduced subsidies, maintained multiple exchange rates, and imposed import quotas, among other things.”²

During the previous period, the political left-wing emphasized the awareness of a collective and political conception of society. This aim worked for the visual arts as well. There was a sort of social construction of new visual arts in order to rescue an excluded social identity imagery. The mural paintings were the main developments of these types of images, representing contingent political content, especially during the decade before the arrival of the socialist government. Groups of working people called ‘brigades’ made different mural paintings depicting ideas that were relevant issues in a new era of social demands, making visual arts another course of action to make people visible.³ This self-affirmation intensified during the socialist experience of the early 1970s when artistic production became necessary and urgent through the intense action of the brigades to reinforce the changes and the promises of the socialist government.

Nevertheless, there was a strong reaction opposing the measures that took place throughout the three-year socialist period. The coup by Chilean Army forces established a dictatorship that lasted from 1973 to 1990. The government palace (called *La Moneda*) was bombed, ruined, and the photographs of the bombing itself appeared in many international newspapers. The coup was the break of continuity, not only of the economy, politics, or the practices of a democratic community. Institutions were smashed, producing a split of the country’s being. Many people were exiled, and at least three thousand were killed or disappeared. The shattering social-political context changed the cultural domain, too. The coup marked a deep wound in the development of artistic production. The beginning of this new government introduced a different conception of culture, which was viewed by the regime as a potential enemy, since many artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals were close to socialist values and principles. Marxism had to be defeated permanently, at all levels and meanings necessary. Many books and other materials declared subversive were burned in the streets of Santiago.

This destruction was recreated by some visual artists. Today, we can recognize some of the events in the paintings of some painters. These kinds of representations were not included in the National Museum of Fine Arts, which as a public institution,

² Deon Geldenhuys, *Isolated States: A Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 317.

³ Milan Ivelic and Gaspar Galaz, *Chile, arte actual* (Valparaíso: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, 1988), 91.

started to be ruled by the new government. Having a new conception of culture by the new power, there was a noticeable diminution in the development of several cultural expressions. Many people (opponents to the régime, as well as its adherents) did talk about a *cultural blackout*, a term referring to the limited cultural production at that time. It was impossible to hide the power of censorship, which tried to repress any hint of creation, production, and circulation of cultural goods, which could be considered opposition to the new authorities.

This promoted some actions of resistance. There was no way to hide the power of censorship, which tried to suppress any hint of creation, production, and circulation of cultural goods that could be seen as “Marxist” or “communist”. The new power inhibited the new expressive manifestations, promoting paradoxically, and perhaps unknowingly, defiant works of art which enclosed, above all, a subversive essence against the order.

It is precisely from this resistance that a group of artists constituted a strong core of works in terms of the works’ meaning-irradiation. The effects of this body of work are more comprehensible through subsequent time. As if its sense was only understandable from its deferred action (Foster points this out as *Nachträglichkeit*, a German concept which alludes to the comprehension of the avant-garde based on its systematically re-reading⁴). Rather than furious and explicit denunciation, these artists produced a *displacement of the signs* of that context: artistic production did overlap its meanings and postpone its comprehension, making it only understandable from its deferred action. This group, Collective Art Actions (C.A.D.A.), was formed in 1979 and questioned the effects of the military coup in society. This task was not so verifiable in what their images *exhibited*, but in what they proposed as *underlying content* instead. These productions discarded conventional ways of representing reality (such as easel painting or traditional sculpture). Instead, its messages were articulated more cryptically. Some of these works resorted to conceptualism, body art, or even land art strategies, as displacement of signs which referred to the context at that time: artistic production made a superposition of elusive meanings when confronting the dictatorship.

C.A.D.A. proposed thinking of art as a whole, trying to merge art and life. In this way, it was not so new. After all, they were very influenced by international movements, mainly European. Its novelty was the hostile scenario of military censorship and the threat to their own integrity. C.A.D.A. proposed not only a new meaning, pointing out contingency, but also a new way of expressing ideas, while at the same time they entered into a sensibility that melted subjective experience, collective consciousness, history reflection, and political content through *material writing*. Renouncing to the pictorial practices of the stain, the nuance, the color, the technical delimitation of Fine Arts painting, C.A.D.A. appealed to contingent action, to the body as an expressive device. This placed a theoretical and practical renovation of the artistic sphere, paradoxically under a repressive scenario. C.A.D.A. was double negativity:

⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 207.

dissidence of the artistic and institutional circuit and density of meaning opposed covertly to the régime as well. This negativity was shaped as a theoretical-practical renewal from a national version of an *avant-garde*, which thought itself as a political and poetical force eluding repression. This included visions located not in the official discourse of the Academy, institutionalized as an exclusive knowledge, but also in the narratives from the margins of social life.

Four art actions of C.A.D.A. will be described to establish a bounded vision about the group and its context. These are not ordered chronologically, and represent a general outline of the tactics used to generate a critical discourse:

1. For the action “The inversion of the scene” there was a parade of ten milk trucks in front of the Museum of Fine Arts. The front of the museum was covered with a white canvas. The trucks were requested from a milk company telling them that it was part of a ‘piece of art’, to hide the social content of the work. A visible tour of these trucks moved from the company (implicitly adherent of the military government) to a conservative institution such as the Museum of Fine Arts. The white canvas *inverted the scene*: it promoted censorship of the museum itself, as an allegory of the traditional art conventions and as an official institution of dictatorial ideas about how culture should be. By covering the front with the cloth, C.A.D.A. indicated that art was not inside, but outside the museum, turning the spectator-work of art relation inside out. The aim was to denounce political violence and cultural censorship in a threatened country, under constant surveillance by the dictatorship. The work of art moves from the museum to the street, which is the object of contemplation. C.A.D.A. declared that this production constituted “a social sculpture”⁵: an “action of art that tries to organize, through intervention, the time and space in which we live, as a way, first to make it more visible, and then, easier to live.”⁶ The museum was under the control of the dictatorship; for that reason, the milk trucks operated as a reverse of the military government. While tanks and troops threatened the destruction of the Marxist enemies, trucks, and artists exhibited hope, through the presence of milk as a metaphor for nutrition and life. The meaning was not visible at that time. One of the company’s managers was convinced about the *beauty* of the image to get the trucks as a kind of contribution to “The Art” (in a romantic and traditional sense). They told him: “Just imagine the beauty of ten milk trucks in front of the Museum of Fine Arts.” After the event, someone pointed out to the manager of that company that he had been cheated. The manager tried to buy the video of the action, trying to avoid its spreading. As the group did not sell it, he changed the logo of the trucks to “clean up the image” of the company.⁷

2. The action “For not dying of starvation in art” had several stages: the group distributed a hundred half liter bags of milk in a popular (and poor) neighborhood of Santiago. It was not the first time that someone gave them milk: former President

⁵ Robert Neustadt, *Cada día: la creación de un arte social* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2001), 39.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 31

Salvador Allende promised to provide half a liter of milk to each Chilean child since protein was scarce and difficult to get at that time. Such action, delivering milk to underprivileged people, was a poetical approach to make these people visible, make a smooth reference to this past promise and engraving a political gesture from an aesthetic way. The artists asked for the bags back and gave them to other artists to use it as a surface to paint and exhibit in a gallery. Again, the streets were surreptitiously in an exhibition inside an artistic institution, like a gallery. A white page was published in a magazine with the text: “Imagine this completely white page / Imagine this white page as the daily milk to consume / Imagine every corner of Chile deprived of daily milk consumption as white pages to fill.” A text was read and transmitted by loudspeakers in front of the headquarters of the United Nations in Santiago, the text was titled “is not a village” and was an account of how inequality affected Latin America; at the art gallery, an acrylic box was filled with milk bags, leaving them to decompose. Again, many people were not aware of the political content of the work.

3. In the work “Zone of pain”, the writer Diamela Eltit executed several actions. She cut and burned herself with acid in her arms and legs. The pain was part of subjective experience but projected its effects on an anonymous social body, which was living an intense pain as well. She read fragments of one of her novels in a brothel and washed the outside street with water and soap. While washing the sidewalk, Eltit’s image was duplicated through a projection on the walls. Later, she sought and found a homeless person and kissed him, trying to abolish the hierarchy of bodies. These actions made an inscription of the artist’s gesture in unconventional material space and the appropriate two conditions which are part of a transgression at that time: the renovation of artistic practices, and the questioning of daily living conditions. The gestures and actions, and the use of the body itself as an inscription site of creation was a remarkable issue: it was a sort of metaphor which tried to understand, through the reconsolidation of retrieved memories, the pain, and perplexity of Chile’s historical context.

4. In “Ay Sudamérica” (Oh, South America) (1981), six airplanes dropped 400,000 fliers on Santiago. Printed on these fliers was a message that upheld the right of each person to a decent standard of living, while proposing a concept of new art, to overcome the traditional limits of the elite and become part of public life. This work alluded to the bombing of the House of Government (when the military régime started to rule the country). One of the phrases on the flier described the viewer and also placed him as a potential protagonist of self-awareness:

WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THESE PLACES AND LOOK AT
HEAVEN, AND UNDER IT THE SNOWY SUMMITS, RECOGNIZE
ON THIS SITE THE SPACE OF OUR LIVES: THE BROWN SKIN,
STATURE AND LANGUAGE, THOUGHT.

And on the other hand, it democratized the idea of art:

WE ARE ARTISTS, BUT EVERY MAN THAT WORKS FOR THE EXTENSION, ALTHOUGH MENTAL, OF ITS SPACES OF LIFE IS AN ARTIST.

The pilots were ex-military and C.A.D.A. had to request permission from the Air Force, part of the military government. In the application letter, the work was presented as an example of “ecological art” or “land-art”, an artistic field that was developed mainly in the USA, Europe and Japan (which was a way to legitimize the artistic value of the work): “The work is a sculpture on the sky of the city.” Permission was granted. Again, the message was both shared with and hidden from the authorities. The work appeared in a national newspaper, in the tourism section, showing how some artists “made art from the air, speaking about happiness and art”. Again, no many people (the authorities included) could see this gesture as a rupture of tradition: “the brown skin” was a metonymical affirmation of identity in a context that traditionally concealed indigenous existence. The flyers were another form of elusive representation: instead of food dropped from planes, given to starving people (another wink to nutritious dominion), this ‘food’ was a poetical device that addressed people to become conscious of themselves.

The works developed by C.A.D.A. are a milestone in terms of changing the action of resistance against a forced new order. It goes from the simple logic of resistance to dictatorship through explicit representation of facts – in a formalistic way – to a political-programmatic claim. The actions and texts were assembled with metaphors and signs displacements, attacking the structures of power and the new prevailing order in a concealed and veiled way.

C.A.D.A. did question the prevalence of the conventional picture and its contemplation, which were related to an aristocratic tradition of *Beaux-Arts* and promoted the use of social visuality, understood as press photography and the mechanical reproduction of art.⁸ At the same time, they requested the role of the institutional frame in terms of its legitimizing action on visual arts production and developed a transdisciplinary work between cinema, literature, art, and social sciences.⁹

Rightwing questioning the group was to be expected because conservative forces traditionally were close to the convention in terms of artistic production. The movement was dismissed as ‘crazy’ young boys and girls: they were just ‘pranking’ and ‘needed to order their own lives’. Institutional knowledge denied the relationship of their works to the concept of art. From the orthodox political left, the collective was branded ‘elitists’ because of their use of sophisticated (and *bourgeois*) technologies such as video. Others condemned the involvement of poor people as part of their works, or the difficulty for common people in decoding of the signs without specialized knowledge of the artistic discipline.

⁸ Nelly Richard, *La insubordinación de los signos* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1994), 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*

But looking back, C.A.D.A. developed a kind of aesthetic experience based on a hidden resistance, deceiving political power with cryptic messages, avoiding communicability, and explicit content. Hiding the signs and displacing the meanings was, paradoxically, again, the way to connect art and a public sphere like politics. If aesthetics can be thought of as the attempt to generate a plot, with different senses for a certain social context through its critical posture, it can be understood, simultaneously, as an apprehension of the real through a new “distribution of the sensible”.¹⁰ If we consider this conception in Rancière’s thought, we may distinguish how C.A.D.A. re-distributed the range of participation of the audience, in terms of the comprehension of art in society. The access to the messages, encrypted in the works of art, opened only on an underlying level. According to Rancière, “the distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed.”¹¹ The hidden meaning of the signs displayed in the artworks based on the political facts, the altered state of legislation, the repressive measures, the pain of the dead, and missing people. These circumstances were part of a systematic way of government, and most of the time, the spectator had to be aware of the facts that the artworks of C.A.D.A. were exhibiting.

The case of C.A.D.A. in Chile could point to a way in which aesthetics can locate and be thought of as emancipatory knowledge, positioning the artist as a subversive agent who can be transgressive to rethink the order of the visual artwork in its social context. Here, the artistic production is subject to an overlap of its meanings through the rewriting of the signs that made up its own practices. This included the replacement of conventional materials and incorporating media that included the sensitivity of the audience and the bodies of the artists. Displacing meanings was a strategy to deceive authorities and censors, and as a way to question and renew the artistic institutional context. C.A.D.A. was a short-term movement. Nevertheless, its artistic works still having influences in future artistic production. Hidden messages could be seen as something *naïve* or even pointless at one moment. But thinking in deferred time, as Foster said, the conception of the subversive, the transgressive, and the compromised work could find its sense.

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¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2006), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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