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Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University

Embodied Absence: Chilean Art of the 1970s Now

Cambridge, MA: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, 2016.

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, October 27, 2016–January 8, 2017



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Installation view, *Embodied Absence: Chilean Art of the 1970s Now*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, October 27, 2016–January 8, 2017 (photograph © 2017, provided by Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University)

In last year's exhibition of Chilean art at the Carpenter Center for Visual Art at Harvard University, absence signaled the latency of bodies that feel pain, that suffer longing, or, in a powerful twist, that even travel from 1970s Santiago to present-day Boston. In the works on view in *Embodied Absence: Chilean Art of the 1970s Now*, artists used the tactics of conceptual art to respond to the traumas inflicted on citizens after the socialist president Salvador Allende was overthrown by a military coup and the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet established in 1974. Contemporary bodies were also present: three young Chileans collaborated with older artists whose work comprised the bulk of the exhibition to stage performances during its first week, the remains of which were presented in the galleries. These projects conveyed the presence of bodies by displaying evidence of their recent activity. In the case of a commission by Felipe Mujica and Johanna Unzueta, who worked with the choreographer Carmen

Beuchat to restage a dance from 1975, this took the form of sets and props, the brightly colored banners and portable tents that were used by dancers. Cristóbal Lehyt, responding to a reading by CADA (Colectivo de acciones de arte) cofounder Raúl Zurita, inscribed a human figure on the gallery wall using strokes that appeared so agitated as to viscerally suggest a body that had just disappeared.

The performance works in the main gallery, which featured the historical core of the show, were displayed through more expected means: as films, videos, and photographs documenting events that occurred long ago and far away. These projects, however, benefited from the sense of something having just occurred in the galleries, a sensation generated by the recent collaborations by Lehyt and by Mujica and Unzueta. By activating the temporal register of the exhibition's recent past, the newly commissioned works endowed the historical works on view with a vivid presentness. Much more than secondary documents conveying an event in the past, photographs and videos of well-known projects of the 1970s and 1980s, including *A Mile of Crosses* by Lotty Rosenfeld, *Para no morir del hambre en el arte* (*So as Not to Die of Hunger in Art*) by CADA, and *Las Cantatrices* (*The Female Singers*) by Carlos Leppe, asserted themselves as presences that brought material and sensorial residues of the historical past into the contemporary time of the gallery.

Embodied Absence presented a spare thirteen projects in three distinct spaces. The large ground-floor gallery displayed the sets constructed by Mujica and Unzueta. If this ground-floor space felt like a set recently absent of performers, all other areas of the exhibition were densely peopled. Bodies crowded two galleries on the third floor, where they appeared as representations in photographs, prints, sculpture, and films. On the third floor appeared Lehyt's drawing, which depicts a nude, kneeling woman. Her jittery, ghostly body was flanked by works from the 1970s by Elías Adasme and Juan Downey, the nervous energy of Lehyt's drawing bringing immediacy to the photographs and videos of the young bodies that appeared in the historical works. Adasme photographed himself hanging bare chested by his ankles alongside a map of Chile in his series *To Chile: Art Actions* (1979–80). Appearing slightly smaller than life-size, his body looked vulnerable; he wore only Levis, and his bare feet and shaggy beard and hair lent him the look of the young leftists who were being tortured. Young people also appeared in Downey's video *In the Beginning* (1976), in which, speaking

in stylized dialogue, members of an experimental theater group chanted a narrative that implicitly criticized the media and elite for denying the brutality of the Pinochet regime.

The omission of newly commissioned works in the exhibition's core gallery signaled that historical revisionism was its main task. Presenting themes of transnationalism and sexual politics, projects by Luz Donoso and materials from the archives of Cecilia Vicuña introduced this gallery, setting the tone for an art-historical narrative that expanded extant accounts of activism in Chile during Pinochet's regime, accounts that have, to a large degree, been dominated by a compact account of CADA's work that neither adequately allows for sexual politics nor transnational collaborations. Donoso's wheat-pasted posters, displaying one of the "subversive logotypes" she began making after being fired from her university teaching post, presented terror in the form of an elegant rendering of a female torso that both resembled a mannequin and a target-practice poster. Expanding CADA's activities beyond Chile and highlighting Vicuña's involvement, the show featured her correspondence with the group, including snapshots that CADA sent to her of the landmark action *Para no morir del hambre en el arte* (1979) while she was living in exile in Bogotá. Paired with drawings of an action by Vicuña entitled *Vaso de leche, Bogotá (Glass of Milk, Bogotá)*, in which she spilled a glass of milk on the street by pulling it over with a tiny lasso, Vicuña's correspondence revealed that she staged her work as a component part of *Para no morir del hambre en el arte*. The latter well-known action we learn from this material was meant to occur simultaneously in Santiago, Bogotá, and Toronto and to include such ancillary and modest actions as Vicuña's *Vaso de leche*, a connection that is usually not acknowledged in histories of CADA and that expands the impact of the group's practice.

The mutilated and truncated body of Donoso's posters was repeated and amplified inside the core gallery. Catalina Parra's *Imbunche gigante (Giant Imbunche)*, a 1977 work that she re-created for the show, displayed a stuffed body constructed of white cotton fabric. Lacking head, feet, and arms, it was held together with awkward, primitive stitches and attached to a white field, which hung on the wall like a shower curtain. It was artwork that was designed to disintegrate and rot over time, and the pristine, unblemished cotton of this version was even more unnerving in the close company of images of Leppe in a bright-white body cast. On video and in archival photographs, Leppe performed *Las Cantatrices (The Female Singers)* (1979) while wearing a cast that prevented him from moving and expressing emotion and that, rather than protecting him, rendered him vulnerable. The unsettling effects of Leppe and Parra's works were heightened by the unapologetic visual pleasure presented in images by Francisco Copello and Vicuña that faced them. Copello photographed himself in heavy make-up, constructing collages that layered his self-portraits with delicate pieces of tulle, glitter, and gold leaf. In a large-scale projection of a film by Vicuña entitled *Sol y Dar y Dad* (1980), young people dressed in orange and red moved in brightly colored settings—they frolicked in a verdant park in Bogotá, throwing a gigantic red ball, and walked the streets of the city carrying a sign that displayed the drawing of a schematically rendered dismembered body labeled with the word *mentira* (lie).

After these vivid images of bodies, the video documenting CADA's important action *Para no morir del hambre en el arte*, and its use of tactics associated with conceptual art, including dematerialization, language, and institutional critique, conjured an unexpectedly suggestive narrative. This art action was organized by members of CADA, Zurita, Fernando Balcells, Diamela Eltit, Lotty Rosenfeld, and Juan Castillo to pay homage to Allende by memorializing his anti-hunger policy of providing a liter of milk to each Chilean child. The action involved staging a series of events that occurred in a single day: distributing free milk to an impoverished community near Santiago, driving a caravan of milk trucks through the city, and staging an exhibition in an art gallery. Although we never lost a sense that we were viewing these events across great expanses of time and space, the poverty of the recipients and the daring of the artists were palpably conveyed in the postures and expressions of their bodies. Whether the project was naive or heroic, symbolic or activist, or all of the above, immense subjectivity was brought to bear in the evocative framing of the video that *Embodied Absence* provided. That the exhibition was organized under the auspices of a project on Chilean art organized by the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies is important. It reminds us that when an exhibition brings to life residues of subjectivity—of the body as a loving, hungry, and hopeful force—it does the important work of bringing these qualities to new histories. In this instance, the histories of Chilean art during a key period of conceptualism benefit enormously from the new knowledge brought to bear at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts last winter.

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