

Exhibition Review

Embodied Absence: Chilean Art from the 1970s to Now

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

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Embodied Absence: Chilean Art from the 1970s to Now, held at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) at Harvard University during the fall of 2016 and curated by Liz Munsell, introduced a multi-layered narrative on Chile's neo-avant-garde scene (Escena de Avanzada). The exhibition portrayed art's defiant role in Chile's sociopolitical history following the military coup d'état in 1973 which led to a fragmented historicity, cultural amnesia, and a fundamental cultural and political identity crisis that affected the evolution and circulation of avant-garde art practices. Chile's Escena de Avanzada emerged during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-90) and was formed by artists who subverted the regime's rhetoric of power and censorship by exploring the relationships between art and politics. The exhibition included works from twelve artists whose contributions span multimedia practices including video, installation, photography, and performance, as well as documentation of ephemeral and dematerialized art actions. *Embodied Absence* presented gestures of resistance at a particular historical moment in which the Chilean social fabric had been torn apart by political repression and the destruction of democratic governance.

The trope of a wounded body resonated throughout the exhibition, alluding to the shattered sense of Chile's collective identity in the aftermath of the coup. In Carlos Leppe's video installation *Las Cantatrices* (The Female Singers) (1979), Leppe's imprisoned and immobilized body becomes a site of desire and revolt. The resonating sound of the installation permeated throughout the space: *Las Cantatrices* comprises three TV screens showing the fragmented body parts of Leppe, covered with surgical materials, which were placed across from a fourth screen in which his mother is reading an affective letter about the birth of the artist. The corporeal tensions embedded in the dialogue between Leppe and his mother were heightened by the viewer's inability to simultaneously view all four screens at once and served as a witness to the familial exchange. The dysfunctional use of medical devices, while limiting Leppe's physical mobility and restricting any natural pose or expression, transform him into an embodiment of a "traumatic coefficient of the cultural apparatus' fracturing bodies."¹ In its partiality and divided setting, Leppe's work functioned as a symbolic center of the exhibition, guiding the viewer through both the room and the narrative of Chile's fragmented history in the 1970s.

Several works in the exhibition were catalysts for political change and worked to transform social structures. In the video *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte* (So as Not to Die of Hunger in Art) (1979), the Chilean activist group CADA (*Colectivo de Acciones de Arte*)² is seen distributing one hundred liters of milk to the local residents in a low-income neighborhood in Santiago. CADA's art action is considered a direct reference to the socialist idealism of the *Unidad Popular* government, as they failed in their promise of distributing a half-liter of milk to every child in Chile every day. CADA's social engagement addressed the issues facing Chile's national populace by using the symbol of milk to denounce poverty, hunger, and economic

¹ Nelly Richard, *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973* (Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986), 67.

² Art Action Collective

deprivations.³ The group's art action revealed the contradictions of a class-based society and the utopian fusion of life and art praxis. They aspired to transform life into "visible and livable social experiences," performed in the social sphere where art and politics converge.⁴

Embodied Absence crafted new histories and memories about Chile's fragmented past and conveyed the story of a nation that still suffers from a traumatic and scarring episode in its history. The exhibition provided access to a discursive battleground where different versions of the past create multiple truths about Chile's violent conflict in which experiences of loss, trauma, fracture, and instability were ubiquitous. Munsell's thoughtful selection of works contributed to the formation of a new collective narrative of post-coup Chile. While filling in the lapses and interrupted pathways in the art history and public memory of Chile, *Embodied Absence* proposed novel ways of looking at this material from a temporal, social, and geographic perspective, notably contributing to an understudied area.

Images and captions:



Installation view of *Embodied Absence*, 2016. Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge MA. Photo courtesy of the author.

³ Ibid., 54.

⁴ Nelly Richard. *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 41.



CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte), *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte* (So as Not to Die of Hunger in Art), 1979, Video (Black and White, Sound), 20 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo courtesy of the author.