



Werken

Curatorial speech by Ticio Escobar

The Mapuche Issue

The work *Werken* by Bernardo Oyarzún was conceived specifically for the Chilean Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennial (2017). The artist bases his work, in this piece as in many others, on the great conflicts overshadowing the Mapuche horizon, diminishing their lands, undermining their cultural territories and renewing their claims. *Werken* opens up a parallel scene to welcome the bodies and names of the Mapuche people, excluded from an effective participation in the public arena; he does so by radicalizing, on the one hand, the tension between the complex contents related to the issue of the Mapuche people and, on the other hand, the critical, poetic and aesthetic quality of contemporary art.

Werken is much more than merely setting up this work at the Biennial's pavilion. It expands into an out-of-work that involves essential voices and images to address an issue whose complexity requires diverse cross-perspectives. The catalog acts as a parergon: a complement that is partially part of the work, promoting transits between what appears on the scene and what happens elsewhere, although resonating in it. The catalog thus generates a broad field of action from which voices, images and discourses are generated to further the work. In this parallel scene, there are not only essays, such as those by Fernando Castro, Jaime Huenún, Andrea Josch and Sergio Rojas, which place Oyarzún's work and the Mapuche issue on different levels, but also words, concepts and figures of the Mapuche themselves. In it, bodies appear and names are inscribed, which



in the work itself slide like images reluctant to the order of the symbol. Josch's participation has been key to support the area that surrounds the work and, without closing it, to link it with the worlds of meaning of the Mapuche culture and with their just demands for territory, inclusion and equity.

Although the Mapuche issue has had a certain participation in Chilean public debate for decades, its approach has not been significantly translated into effective state policies, nor has it deeply permeated cultural reflection, much less encouraged the discourse on art. Except for valuable exceptions, the consideration of Mapuche aesthetics takes a purely ethnographic perspective and is exhausted in metalwork, woodwork and textiles, manifestations of undoubtedly creative and formal value, but unrelated to political implications and removed from any reflection on the historical situation of indigenous peoples. On the other hand, public policies do not include the expressive and sensitive moment of the Mapuche culture or they just reduce it to a harmless picturesque quality linked to artisanal economy and, while searching for the inescapable principle of "diversity", they turn difference into a mere tone embellishing multicultural polychromy.

Oyarzún maintains a critical view of the relationship between the State and the Mapuche people, in his own words, "a kind of state of war", expressed in a denial of indigenous culture. As in Latin America in general, the conflict that began in colonial times and consolidated with the emergence of the modern state has acquired today a special set of characteristics as a result of the aggravation of the land disputes and the disturbances caused by the eruption of communities of indigenous peoples in the cities, including capital cities. According to Oyarzún, the State has historically maintained a double standard regarding the Mapuche issue. On the one hand, it seeks to present a



correct image of inclusion; on the other, "it continues to violate the most basic rights of the Mapuche people, especially with the anti-terrorist law applied in their territories"¹.

The political image

Oyarzún's work takes on this critical vision by seeking to detach from a simple position of protest in order to promote the play of meanings exempted from their subjection to the issue. *Werken* does not pretend to reveal an unfair situation, but to activate its symptoms: to encourage manifestations that conceal/expose the object (or concept) of representation, diverting its manifest paths. For this reason, this work deals with the theme of proscribed alterity by complex rhetorical and poetic records that prevent any instance of closure in the approach to conflicts. This position allows him to overcome both the fetishization of difference (multiculturalist clichés) and the obviousness of protest. But it also allows him to present certain ideological artifices employed by instituted power. The State assigns a place to the indigenous in the symbolic repertoire of the nation, but it does so in a merely declamatory tone that in the facts themselves is displaced from that position and is relocated in an area that is free from political risks: an aseptic space that neutralizes conflicts, smoothing the folds of memory and normalizing names by setting them in alphabetized patterns, disassociated from traditional lineages: unfolded in imported names and surnames.

This displacement leaves a vacant place and a remnant: a gap in the social space and a spectral remainder surrounding it. But the records of representation are not enough to fill the gap of the impossible real or to vent its ghosts; only the work of the imaginary

¹ Quotation marks belong to Bernardo Oyarzún's own opinions shared in private correspondence.



allows for expanding the visual beyond the visible and to see, even in a fleeting way, the expelled moment.

Thus, the critical thrust of Oyarzún's work mobilizes a particular politics of gaze, that is, a politics of the image. Rancière recognizes the political act par excellence to be the redistribution of the visible in the public arena and, consequently, the access of invisible subjects to that scope. To radicalize this necessary action, it is not enough to note what is omitted in the record of the visible; it is necessary to question the omission regime itself. And such a challenge appeals not so much to the evidences of the visible (the presentable and representable, the readable and symbolizable), as to the random arguments of the visual (the imaginary, that which escapes the order of language). Images, provided with the ability to show by hiding and to visualize (but not to make visible) the absent, can restore, for an instant at least, the place of the event: an empty place. There, the dying names can light up.

Representations

Werken continues with a tendency present in the previous curatorship of the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, based on situations of political exclusion and violence². As is pointed out in this current edition, the work exhibited at the Chilean pavilion deals with the appearance/concealment of the Mapuche subject. On the one hand, it faces the truncated social and political representation that disdains their names and faces,

² *The Poetics of Dissidence*, presented under the curatorship of Nelly Richard at the Chilean Pavilion in the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), brought together works by Lotty Rosenfeld and Paz Errázuriz that emphasized the presence of women in the context of the passage from the military dictatorship to the democratic transition in Chile.



undermines their management in the game of power and relegates their place in the distribution of social spaces. On the other, it assumes the ignored aesthetic representation, whose records of swindling and displacement allow for reintroducing issues that best operate from the detour of the absence. This diversion opens up a possibility of laying down the names and showing the faces, placing one and the other, in part, beyond the boundaries of the symbolic regime (of the order of language and what is visible).

Thus, the issue of representation is treated in a double sense. In the first, the faces and names of the Mapuche people do not end up appearing on the public scene, and when they do so they are shown as harmless stereotypes of difference, as clichés that neutralize the political potential and the uniqueness of culture. In the second sense, the failures of representation create distortions in the gaze that can be critically adopted by the subterfuges of art. At this level we do not seek to illustrate or denounce the erasure of the Mapuche presence, but to propose critical images that can make the faces appear and also to list the names on the detour of poetics; that is to say, in the delicate game of distances and approximations demanded by the void. Therefore, the intention is not to present what is missing in the scene of the representation, but to make of its absence a principle of other meanings that intensify the force of what is omitted, keeping the silence in a vibrant and alert state.

The contemporary issue

Connecting indigenous issues with the concerns of contemporary art opens up possibilities that favor each other. Of course, this is an interesting bond as it shows an alternative sensitivity and promotes a special attention to the rights of cultural



difference and the development of inclusive public policies. But in the field of art, the question is a special concern to the extent that it helps to specify a crucial point of contemporaneity. The crisis of the formal autonomy of art has produced, on the one hand, the overwhelming expansion of the formal aesthetic moment (the metastasis of techno-images, soft aesthetics promoted by the world-market) and, on the other hand, the uncontrolled advance of extra-artistic contents threatening to dispel the space of art. The question is: is it possible to preserve a basic operation of aesthetic forms without returning to the normative model of the aura or falling into a globalized aesthetic? This question refers to an unresolved and uncertain area: the creation of a work depends on particular conditions of enunciation and reception, unstable circumstances and plural gazes. *Werken* stands before that question by posing a work tensed between intense contents and clear forms. Popular culture develops around the complicated maneuver that works on a beautiful form to deal with matters exceeding it: social, political, religious, and even purely poetic³ issues. But today, the critical art of enlightened tradition also aims for a cross between the purely aesthetic moment and the pragmatic, socio-political effects of artworks.

Oyarzún's work is successful in this complex terrain: it manifests intense moments of the indigenous culture while assuming a contemporary critical perspective. His work, nourished with images of the Mapuche culture, with which he maintains a bond of affinity and affiliation, deals confidently with complicated issues related to that culture to which Oyarzún does not enter from the outside. He does it from his own perspective

³ In this text, the indigenous is treated as a specific modality of the popular. This treatment is based on the growing "popularization" of the ethnic, driven by historical processes of miscegenation and intercultural hybridization. But it is also based on the asymmetrical position of indigenous peoples in the context of Latin American national societies, a position that equates them with other popular sectors.



in popular, marginal contexts, directly linked to his Mapuche ancestry, contexts that belong to him. The artist says that his approximation strategies are direct, because they come from experiences that belong to him as they derive from his origins of class, culture and ethnicity⁴. That is why his "reflections, conjectures and positions correspond to perceptions and sensibilities derived from that context", strongly defining his position. In the artist's words: "This has enabled me to establish my status as an *artist* by a strange way of operating in the art scene"⁵.

This strange way of being an artist - and of being a good artist in a demanding environment such as Chile - is what allows him to access dense nuclei of popular culture that are hardly accessible to an outsider. An outsider can certainly approach these cultural fields and work with those nuclei but only by assuming his different place of enunciation: without trying to usurp another perspective. Different cultures offer other moments of their own to those who do not have their experiences in their own bodies, nor retained in the folds of community language, nor preserved in the memory of their common heritage.

Oyarzún's work processes issues arising both from the sociopolitical circumstances that determine the production of popular culture as well as from the various aesthetic and imaginary artifices that he mobilizes in the course of that production. To recapitulate: this work aims to refute a swindling. On the one hand, the official rhetoric conceals aesthetic and political practices of the Mapuche culture that would promote its active agency in the public scene; on the other, it presents certain moments of that culture as

⁴ Bernardo Oyarzún, *Cuerpo de obra*, personal communication, Santiago, 2016

⁵ Ibid.



an abstract badge of diversity: as the presentation of a correct political image, profitable for commercial tourism.

Werken refutes the concealment of names and bodies by strictly aesthetic operations, capable of endorsing a critical position without falling into protesting literalities or idealizations of identity difference. It thus manifests an intense moment of contemporary art in Chile, taking on issues that are history-bound, compromising values of equity and social inclusion, and therefore involving the public sphere not only in that country but in Latin America in general. These approaches enable conflicts of a particular strong incidence, such as those related to identities, political self-management and territory, to break out of the local clutter and open up to a universal debate. The image has the possibility of articulating, even briefly, disparate issues. For a moment, the Mapuche mask is linked to the Venetian mask, even if only because of the fact that both share the imposture or the subtraction of a face.

The scene

Werken is based on the exhibition of 1,500 Mapuche masks that, located in the center of the room, form a circular figure with irregular contours, occupying approximately 10 x 11 meters. The pieces are arranged at eye level, suspended from thin iron rods. In the walls of the room, always at eye level, there is a line of led message boards. According to a previously programmed speed, the boards display 6,906 Mapuche surnames: all of those existing today. The dimly lit scene is illuminated by the boards' red lights.

The proposal is succinct in its narrative components. According to Oyarzún, the austerity of aesthetic means is based on the experience of his own social and ethnic context,



"where problems require practical and aesthetic solutions... emerging in urgency and precariousness"⁶. It is important that the artist puts an emphasis on the aesthetic factor even in situations of urgency and scarcity: if managed properly, this component, despite its laconism, allows for the work to acquire a strong visual presence, mobilizing complex meanings. *Werken* becomes simultaneously brief and powerful, able to process with few resources a consistent discursive and conceptual content. The next few points will present different moments of these intense contents, without pretending to clarify them: looking for scattered signs, small flashes or stitches, punctures of this dour concept.

The names

My hand refused to write what did not belong to me. It told me: "It must be the silence that is born." My hand told me that the world could not be written down⁷.

Mapuche surnames are compound words, constituted both by the proper name and the traditional lineage: thus, the Melipillan, Nawelpillan, Raypillan, etc. all descend from the Pillan. According to Oyarzún, despite the historical efforts of the State to eliminate these strains and despite the forced change of surname of thousands of Mapuche during the 20th century, there are still 6,906 ethnic patronymics that survive scattered, pushed to

⁶ B. Oyarzún. Loc. cit.

⁷ Leonel Lienlaf. "Rebelión", in Cecilia Vicuña (edit.), John Bierhorst (trad.). *Úl: four mapuche poets. An Anthology*. Americas Society. Latin American Literary Review Press, Pittsburgh, 1998, p. 66.



the margins, masked. But they do survive. And that continuity becomes a sign of long resistance, of an obstinate pride, silenced most of the time.

In *Werken*, rather than being symbols, names act as images: detached from any framework, they appear and disappear swallowed by the luminous flux of the message boards. They run along the axis of the masks' eyes. They are not inscribed; they glide on the surface of the screens that swiftly summon and exile them. The electronic device registers them in another cultural setting, making them virtual. Perhaps that same dislocation contributes to their preservation: the message boards partially act as the *werken*, memorizing words disseminated in the air, moving them hastily, repeating them to avoid their exhaustion. They are words disseminated beyond writing, beyond language. They are fluctuating words, lacking levels of inscription; texts that run before faces of empty bowls. Thus, they do not belong to the order of the symbolic or to the record of the visible, but for that very reason, they are rooted in the regime of the visual, in the imaginary order: the terrain of the gaze (which knows how to find luminous signs in the propitious backdrop of nothingness).

Counterparts

The Mapuche masks, *kollong*, are carved in a single piece of native wood, usually raulí, and are sometimes completed with horsehair, used as a mustache. The masks present radically schematic solutions that suppose a precise handling of sculptural work, balancing the pieces between the aesthetic and the expressive; between the strict order of form and the weight of disproportionate contents. The number of masks here presented does not correspond to the number of currently used surnames, since many of these have become vacant, without a subject carrying them. Even so, the number of

pieces is considerable: perhaps representing the whole group of the ceremony where the mask is worn, the *Ngillatún*⁸; but they could also represent a community, a *lof*; or maybe an army of warriors, *weichafes*, or even a great gathering of lineages, an *aylla-rewe*⁹. The set of masks also suggests a threatening crowd; a silent, expectant audience; or a whole people: humanity seen from the radical nucleus of culture, backed by the certainties of myth and the irrefutable appearances of the ritual.

Digression on ritual

The rite is a staging of the social aspect. It is the instance of representation par excellence; as such, it works in a contradictory way: it unites society, renews its contracts and relieves it of its tired times. But the rite also disturbs the social body with the shadows and illusions of the theater; it forces it to go out of itself, to peer into the abyss of its ghosts and to face the center of nothingness that sustains it: an absence that can only be glimpsed, briefly, through images. This empty space is both a risk to social stability and a guarantee of constant resignification; it points out the essential gap covered by the mask, becoming a face of the unrepresentable.

⁸ "Recently, after expressing her agreement with the Werken project, a papai or lamien (wise and elderly Mapuche woman) gave me an important piece of information. During the ritual of prayers, Ngillatun, a kollong (masked person) orders and safeguards the act and protects the machi (powerful female shaman, doctor, counselor and protector). But when other delicate ceremonies are performed, such as the Machitun, during which the machi exercises her power to heal or repel the ailments, the Kollong acts as an army of protectors of the werken, the messengers, against evil energies." Personal communication with Bernardo Oyarzún, February, 2017.

⁹ According to Juan Ñanculef Huaiquinao, the alliance of 9 lof, communities based on a common lineage, constituted the rewe-mapu confederation; In turn, the meeting of 9 rewe-mapu conformed the aylla-rewe parliament, which thus comprised 81 lof.
[Http://futawillimapu.org/pub/2012/LA_CIVILIZACION_MAPUCHE,_ASTRONOMIA_Y_CIENCIA_IN DIGENA.pdf](http://futawillimapu.org/pub/2012/LA_CIVILIZACION_MAPUCHE,_ASTRONOMIA_Y_CIENCIA_IN DIGENA.pdf). P. 26.

Countenances

*I was a trunk formed by thousands of faces that came out of your face*¹⁰.

The Mapuche masks hold the paradoxical power of representation: embodying absences, like that of ancestors, the dead and the lost spirits, whether adverse or propitious. Such power enables them to ensure the continuity of culture by inventing bridges over the voids, creating links between separate spheres and linking diverse times that cannot be reconciled in any real moment and that can only be crossed in the virtual mode authorized by the image. This mode locates the mask in a political dimension: the *kollong* represent social roles and, simultaneously, allows for discussing this regime of roles and therefore, a re-sketching of the public cartography. But this operation takes place outside the representation scene, which denies itself within art. It takes place suspended in the void.

Absent body

According to Oyarzún, a representational strategy of his consists in the masochistic overexposure of his own body¹¹. But in this work, the place of the body is empty. The mask consumes the cycle of its fatality: it cannot reveal the face it hides because it has delegated its identity and deposed of its name.

¹⁰ L. Lienlaf. Ídem, p. 62.

¹¹ B. Oyarzún. Loc. cit.



The exhibited masks are not carried by flesh and bone officers, but by abstract lines that hold them above the ground, suspended: they resemble a stark floating crowd; marked by the tragic truth of representation, which forces them to hide what wants to be revealed. A spectral crowd that conceals and reveals the absence of their eyes (the missing eyes), the swindling of the body and the conversion of the face into pure countenance. And that terrible revelation (nothing lies behind it) is the strength of the characters: the power of the ghost that blurs the limits of human condition, shaken between what is and what is not. They return from that irrefutable truth: they cross back the lintel of representation to re-inscribe their vetoed names and flaunt their faces, which mark the many faces that want to be masked.

Information about the *werken*¹²

The name *werken*, that gives its title to Oyarzún's work, refers to a complex character, bearer of the social word. Basically responsible for carrying messages, the *werken* must also fulfill other serious missions, such as the representation of the *lof* (community) and diplomatic mediation and counseling for the *lonko* (the highest political authority). These ministries required special skills that included rhetorical eloquence, expressive potential, and oratory faculties; in this sense, Painemal Caro says that the *werken* had to know how to transmit the information with "emotional intention"¹³. On the other hand, these versatile heralds had to have the ability to memorize the messages to convey

¹² For the purposes of the development of this curatorship, unless another source is referred to, the references of the masks, as well as other aspects of the Mapuche culture, have been provided by Bernardo Oyarzún from his own knowledge on the subject.

¹³ Ximena Painemal Caro. *Identidad y espiritualidad mapuche: la visión del machi*. PhD Thesis, Universidad ARCIS de Artes y Ciencias Sociales, Social Sciences and Humanities Area, Santiago, Chile, 2011, p. 49.



them faithfully to the other *lonkos* during the meetings called *koyang*, and also had to be strong enough to gallop over enormous distances and reach the different villages that would participate in the *aylla-rewe*, the great parliaments gathered on critical occasions, such as cataclysms or wars. In certain cases, the heralds would have covered the entire *wallmapu*, the Mapuche territory.

The *werken* has the capacity to announce the possible time of an expectation that historical reality seems to have shut down: a political virtuality capable of looking beyond the social to its un-representable side. Politics is not here thought of as "art of the possible," as defined by Bismarck, and later slogan for *Realpolitik*, but as a work that enables us to glimpse into the real (the impossible) that shelters all social configuration. In this perspective, Arditi proposes to change the concept of the impossible based on "that which could never happen" by another "that impels to act as if something was possible"¹⁴. Discarding the purely calculable, this impulse follows the promise of something to come: the announcement of a different time, perhaps even a better one. "Art is the harbinger of an impossible message," says Dufrenne¹⁵: "nothing notifies; or rather, it notifies nothing. Nothingness as a radical absence that clears space for the event: a clearing, a *Lichtung* according to Heidegger. That is why art is close to politics: not because it turns injustice into a subject matter, but because it is capable of imagining a change, even a small one, on the social map. Not by its attribution for prophesying, but by its faculty of announcing a space ready to welcome the whole

¹⁴ Benjamín Arditi. *Agitado y Revuelto. Del arte de lo posible a la política emancipatoria*. Programa de Democracia Sociedad Civil-Topu'ã Paraguay. Semillas para la Democracia, Asunción, 2012.

¹⁵ Mikel Dufrenne. "El arte y la ciencia del arte, hoy", en Mikel Dufrenne y Viktor Knapp, *Corrientes de la investigación en las Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 3, Arte y Estética. Derecho, Tecnos, Unesco, Madrid, 1982, p. 297.



bodies. Not because it has acquired the gift of guessing, but because it can anticipate a clearing where all names can be inscribed.

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