

Hay una remembranza a los soldados de la muralla china.La pompa y la solidez de la casta militar contrastada con el “eterno retorno” de cada uno de nosotros. Ahora que no es para todos, ¡no es para todos! Somos un grupo de privilegiados. Gracias por la entrega.

*Eduardo Segovia*

¿Qué hizo de éste país grande? Gran hipocresía, gran cartuchismo, gran racismo, gran represión. Muchos temas no se hablan, no se confrontan opiniones diferentes. Vestigios de la milicia que marcan esta sociedad chilena actual.

*Anónimo.*

## CHILLE IN CHILE

Gonzalo Pedraza  
Art Historian  
Santiago, Chile. November, 2009

In our domestic visual arts scene, the concept of the political has reverberated quite noisily for some time now. With this in mind, I would like to clarify that in the work I have undertaken as a curator I have always maintained a considerable distance from what is commonly termed ‘political art.’ Locally, this confluence of concepts has been treated as a kind of singularity that grants art a status in which ‘the political’ is often a valid label for the artist at the moment of creating a work of art. This confluence, to me, seems ambiguous, innocent, and occasionally perverse, and the sum of these sensations is what prompts me to keep my distance.

The piece that Mexican artist Yoshua Okón created in Chile was, in general terms, a recreation of the funeral of Augusto Pinochet, a matter that dives straight into the political realm. In this case, however, my apprehensions regarding the matter abated because I perceived something singular and refreshing in Okón’s work: the artist’s treatment of the political did not fall prey to the game of denunciation, nor did it obey any kind of social critique or agenda. Armed with irony but free of prejudice, Okón decided that the piece would approach the topic from his own territory, and that he would use the artistic space as an excuse to reflect upon the visual politics that surrounds the images of the dictatorship and the arts in Chile.

The investigative process that the artist embarked upon a year ago, in collaboration with the gallery and its curatorial staff, has come to fruition through the use of videos, the projection of those videos, and a series of sculptures. These endeavors are essential to the interpretation that follows, which establishes a direct relationship between *CHILLE* and the visual world of the dictatorship in Chile.

### PREVIOUS WORK

The series that Yoshua Okón has created deals with issues that are relevant to a particular social context, analyzing and

Notable. Impactante como la imagen de un acto que pudiera quedar atrás en nuestra memoria, es recuperado por un extranjero. A tomar en cuenta ahora que hay campaña.

*Daniel Kohen*

formalizing the artist's experience through art. The video and installation in his most recent work stand out as two means of expression that effectively translate this inquiry. For *Bocanegra* (2007), Okón approached a group of Mexican Nazi aficionados, and gave them the chance to make a movie. They themselves wrote the script and acted in the piece, which features everything from a march in a city square to the scene of a man ejaculating in homage to the Führer. In this work, which was presented in Berlin, the matter of 'otherness'—a complex term that has always made me somewhat uncomfortable—traveled in the opposite direction: the 'projection' functioned throughout the exhibition as a rejoinder of the image that the Germans had fashioned, now translated by a group of Führer followers in Mexico City. (figure 1)

Along these same lines, in 2006 Okón unveiled the piece entitled *Gaza Stripper*. For this work, the artist went to Israel to study the presence of certain visual signs both in favor and in protest of the withdrawal of the Jewish settlements on the Gaza Strip. The group that opposed such a withdrawal used an orange ribbon or stripe as its symbol. At the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Okón crafted a performance that was comprised of a structure, a kind of mini-stage with lights, cameras, monitors and a stripper, a man who danced round and round in the center of the space, exhibiting neither fatigue nor modesty in his nonstop motion. An orange ribbon dangled from his penis. The opening night of this piece sparked a tremendous controversy in which nobody quite knew what the artist was protesting. The signs were deployed in such a way that they did not necessarily come together in a clear-cut position of any sort (figure 2). The use of ambiguity in signs that are employed to speak from 'the outside' about matters that are relevant on the inside of a very specific context is one of Okón's working methods, at least in the two aforementioned works.

## CHILLE

In the exhibition *CHILLE*, Okón employs a strategy similar to those of the two previously mentioned works. In 2008, he spent three weeks as artist in residence at INCUBO, and during this time the INCUBO team of Josefina Guilisasti, Bárbara Palomino and the present writer proposed that Okón embark on a number of different itineraries throughout the city of Santiago, all of which were directly related to his work. One of these itineraries led us to Lili Marleen, a restaurant located in a central Santiago neighborhood and which is particularly known as a haunt of Pinochet supporters. Upon entering, our ears were greeted with 1930s-era German music, and as we walked past tables filled with diners digging into typical German food, we saw images of Pinochet and his followers hanging on the walls, along with caps, helmets and other bits of military ephemera. Despite all that it represented, it was a fascinating cabinet of curiosities.

In one of Lili Marleen's main rooms, we found ourselves staring at an miniature model, a recreation of Pinochet's funeral: a long parade of soldiers, with a band and horses made of metal marched along, carrying the General's coffin aloft. This piece, which was no more than a meter long and was protected by a glass case that made it seem like a kind of crypt itself, had such visual presence that it left each and every one in the 'research' group absolutely speechless. When someone told us that there were 'no tables available,' we beat our retreat.

This experience left such a strong impression on the artist that it became a fundamental element of the concept and construction of the piece that he ultimately created.

The treatment of this particular matter is an inevitably tricky enterprise: to talk about Pinochet today can easily devolve into either a denouncement or a revival, two directions that can categorically rule out the possibility of a more critical

perspective. As such, I would like to begin with an historical description that together, with an appreciation of the work itself, will offer us one possible reading of *CHILLE*.

In 1973, the governmental palace was bombed, and Armed Forces General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte assumed control of the presidency and instituted a dictatorial regime that lasted until 1989, when he was removed from office by a plebiscite that marked a first step in establishing a democratic system for the election of the country's president. Pinochet died in 2006.

His death meant different things to different people. For the conservative sector of Chilean society, it signified the elimination of a sign that represented the atrocities of the dictatorship, a sign that frequently appeared demanding paybacks and explanations on the many occasions when members of this sector denied connection to the regime. For the sectors that opposed the dictatorship, his death signified the peaceful death of an individual who deserved no such demise. There was, however, something democratic about the reaction to Pinochet's death, in that everyone found it shocking to see the man dead in the mass media. The image of the dictator was the visible face of a complex web of individuals who were the very fabric of the regime, lest we underestimate the importance of ideologues like Jaime Guzmán, who in fact told his law students that the key to influence is invisibility. The 'visibility' of a body dressed up in military garb and who could be seen motionless and vulnerable on his deathbed buried an entire aesthetic of horror that took hold in Chile and that continues to be perpetuated from other beds, death or otherwise. (figure 3)

Of all the images of that funeral, the photographers captured one in particular that surpassed the wildest of fantasies and fictions (figure 4): A group of young people with their hands raised to the General, delivering the very same salute used in

Nazi Germany. Just as we saw in the restaurant, a connection was made between the visual world of the dictatorship and that of the Nazi movement. While we cannot conclusively state that such a relationship existed, we do know that as the funeral unfolded, groups of young neo-Nazis took to the streets burning flags and yelling catchphrases coined by the group Patria y Libertad (Homeland and Freedom).<sup>1</sup> The usual montage of the dictator delivering his speech, with the camera traveling over him from below and moving up the body, the strong voice and the excess of power in his words all seem to evoke Hitler. We can state this thanks to the mediation of photography, radio and television in the representation of such individuals.

The representation of the military realm has its roots in a kind of historiography of the image in relation to power. Yoshua Okón resolved it for this local case through the use of sculptures and the projection of a video. In the main space of the gallery he placed a maquette that recreated what we saw at Lili Marleen. Sculptures about 75 centimeters high, made with plaster-coated sponge, were set up in a straight line that intersected the room. A crypt was recreated and in this way the art gallery was transformed into a kind of mausoleum. The art historian Hans Belting, when speaking about the image of the dead in antiquity, suggests that "the dead person will always be someone who is absent, and death is an insufferable absence that, to make bearable, people attempted to fill with an image."<sup>2</sup> Building an image to create a presence out of something already absent might be one of the signs that exemplify this sculptural assemblage. Gombrich also ponders this issue in his book *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, in which he uses the case of the miniature horses or clay serfs that were buried in the tombs of the powerful and which served as substitutes for the 'living.'<sup>3</sup> This theorization substitutes—forgive the redundancy—the theory of imitation; objects 'are' what they represent. In other words, we are looking

at materializations that are intimately linked to their referenc- es. Now, in this series of sculptures, one does not ‘see’ Pinochet; we only perceive his presence through a fragment of the curatorial text that is displayed at the gallery entrance. Might we say, then, that the dictator is unrepresentable?

In 1974, a year after the military coup in Chile, a Terra- cotta Army was discovered in China: over 7000 life-sized pieces that had been built on the orders of the Emperor Qin Shihuang almost two centuries before Christ. The figures of the human warriors, poised for battle, each one of unique and distinct from the others, had a function that scholars continue to argue about to this very day. According to the art world’s traditional inter- pretation of this occurrence, the emperor was buried along with these figures in a massive mausoleum in an effort to achieve im- mortality. It is not known if, in fact, this was what the emperor wished for but in any event, the objective was achieved to a certain degree. Nearly 2300 years later, the emperor is cited in the present essay: he lives on. (figure 5)

This relationship between the dictatorship and a ter- racotta army discovered one year after the start of the regime in Chile is a connection that one cannot help but draw. The similarities between otherwise disparate cultures and historical eras can often shed light that can be quite helpful for elucidat- ing certain issues.

In the gallery’s other room, we find the previously men- tioned video. Okón recreated the same funeral, but with living, breathing people of a certain age. Walking behind a carriage, women dressed in mourning and men in military garb accom- pany Pinochet’s coffin as it is dragged by a cart, serenaded by the strains of a band. (figure 6). Pinochet is played by a young woman who is in fact the youngest of the group, and she wears a jacket similar to the kind the General wore (figure 7). This video recreation of the funeral rite takes place on the Alameda,

Santiago’s main thoroughfare. Curiously, at certain moments ‘Pinochet’ raises his arms and as he does so all the people pres- ent scream hysterically and then resume walking, completely unfazed. The video was recorded twice and both versions were projected on the wall, and though they seemed to be one and the same they were in fact different. (figure 8). It was as if a view- finder had been created for each of the viewer’s two eyes, and if you looked at one you would drift over to the other one and vice versa, noticing the little differences in tiny changes.

Video projection has a way of formalizing the presence of absence that is different from what sculpture achieves. Sculp- ture has a material component that is similar to the body, while the two-dimensional quality of projection alludes to another problem. (figure 9).

Over the course of conversations the artist remarked that one of the elements that most captured his attention was the notion of memory. In Chile, memory has a political connotation that is directly related to the dictatorship. The recovery of ‘his- toric memory’ has been one of the main platforms of the leftist governments that have also formulated a direction for the production of art connected to that recovered memory. ‘Politi- cal art’ created in post-dictatorship Chile has somehow eluded that objective. Sometimes it achieves its goal, sometimes it does not, creating works of art that perform their function without thinking critically about the space in which they are expressed, the narrativity they employ or the use of materials.

Now, twenty years later, the fact that this kind of art continues to be produced in the same way it was produced in the 1980s seemed noteworthy to Okón, who also bears the weight of being ‘Latin American’ –a label that, it must be said, the es- tablishment considers ‘interesting’. To work from the other side, to negotiate those signs, to conceive of art within its own realm, seem to be very necessary paths for escape. Pinochet’s depiction

in Okón’s work plays the same game: because it is exhibited in a space dedicated to art it denounces the very art of appropriating the sign of the dictatorship, which is continuous and present.

The distance established by a Mexican artist who talks about a Chilean topic though from a certain remove reveals that local ‘political art,’ by being inserted in the very agenda that promotes it (the present administration), inevitably becomes a translator that has no distance at all from its subject. Art can- not afford such a luxury. Pinochet as a sign is not dead; it stands on its own two feet, despite what his burial might have led us to believe. In the end, we all play the game of the funeral, the clo- sure, but we shout out hysterically in our present day when we adopt certain conventions that stem from the ghosts and scraps left behind by the dictatorship. (figure 10)

Every attempt was made to treat this matter without falling prey to denunciation and agendas, and we hope the piece is appreciated in that light. We also hope that this work of art, a perspective from outside, might help us envision a kind of art that, in conjunction with the political, might be able to iden- tify its limitations and possibilities, rather than simply raise its hand to salute the regime of though that predominates at a given moment in time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Patria y Libertad (Homeland and Freedom) was a paramilitary group comprised of young people who opposed Salvador Allende and termed his presidency a “Dictator- ship of the Proletariat.”

<sup>2</sup> BELTING, Hans. *Antropología de la imagen*. Madrid: Katz Editores, 2007, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see GOMBRICH, Ernst. *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. London: Phaidon, 1994.

Exhibition	<b>CHILLE</b>
Artist	<b>Yoshua Okón</b>
Curator	<b>Gonzalo Pedraza</b>
Texts	<b>Gonzalo Pedraza</b>
Date	<b>October 8 – November 27, 2009</b>

Technical Information

**CHILLE, 2009.**

*This exhibit is comprised of a series of 62 rough plaster sculptures lined up as for a military parade: 34 soldiers, 20 musicians in a marching band, 3 horses with riders, 3 solo horses, 1 coffin and 1 wooden carriage painted white.* The soldiers average 75 cm in size, and the horses and the carriage are the largest of all the figures. The series was set up in the central room of the gallery, extending from one wall to the other, dividing the room in two.

**CHILLE, 2009.**

*Two-channel video installation (5 min. Stereo).* Recreation of the funeral of Pinochet: a group of 8 civilians, 5 members of the military, 3 musicians, and 2 drivers of a carriage pulled by a horse carrying a coffin, atop of which is an actress playing Pinochet. Together they make a procession along the central mall of the Alameda, Santiago’s main thoroughfare. The procession marches to the strains of a Mexican funeral hymn. Every so often, ‘Pinochet’ comes back to life, raising his arms which appear from the coffin at which point everyone shouts hysterically for a few seconds and then resumes walking as if nothing at all happened. This sequence was filmed with two cameras and the results are projected simultaneously in the first room of the gallery.

|--|

**Yoshua Okón**

Born in Mexico City in 1970, and presently lives and works in his native city. He holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Fine Arts from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, and a Master in Fine Arts from UCLA in Los Angeles, California, in the United States. He was the founder of the Galería Panadería in Mexico City (1994-2002). His individual shows include: *Ventanilla Única*, Museo Carrillo Gil; *Canned Laughter*, Viafarini, Milan, Italy (2009); *SUBTTLED*, Städtische Kunsthalle München, Munich, Germany; *MAVI*, Galería Revolver, Lima, Peru (2008); *Bocanegra*, The Project, New York, New York, USA (2007); *Saldo a Favor*, Galería Espacio Mínimo, Madrid, España; *Gaza Stripper*, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Herzliya, Israel (2006); *Bocanegra*, Galleria Francesca Kaufmann, Milan, Italy (2005); *Lago Bolsena*, The Project, New York, New York, USA (2005); *Yoshua Okón*, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City; *HCl*, Galería Enrique Guerrero, Mexico City; *Shoot*, The Project, Los Angeles, California, USA (2004); *Art Statement*, Art Basel, Miami, Florida, USA; *Cockfight*, Galleria Francesca Kaufmann, Milan, Italy (2003); *Orillese a la Orilla*, Art & Public, Geneva, Switzerland; *Yoshua Okon*, Galería Enrique Guerrero, Mexico City; New Decor, Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles, California, USA (2002); *Cockfight*, Modern Culture, New York, New York, USA; *Lo Mejor de lo mejor*, La Panadería, Mexico City (2000). Group shows featuring his work include: *The station and Art Wrestling*, Art Perform, Art Basel, Miami, Florida, USA; *Mercosur Biennial*, Porto Alegre, Brazil; *Amateurs*, CCA Wattis, San Francisco, California, USA; *Laughing in a Foreign Language*, Hayward Gallery, London, England (2008); *La era de la Discrepancia*, MUCA, Mexico City; *Escultura social*, MCA, Chicago, Illinois, USA (2007); *Day labor*, PS1 MOMA, New York, New York USA; *Turin Triennial*, Turin, Italy (2005); *Adaptive behaviour*, New Museum, New York, New York, USA; *Fishing in international waters*, Blanton Museum, Austin, Texas, USA; *Don’t call It performance*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain and Museo del Barrio, New York, New York USA (2004); *Terror Chic*, Spruth/Magers, Munich, Germany; *Istanbul Biennial*, Istanbul, Turkey; *The Virgin Show*, Wrong Gallery, New York, New York, USA; *ICP Triennial*, New York, New York, USA (2003); *Mexico City: an Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, PS1 MoMA, Long Island, New York, USA y Kunstwerke, Berlin, Germany; *California Biennial*, OCMA, USA (2002).

|--|

**Gonzalo Pedraza**

Born in Santiago, Chile in 1982 and presently lives and works in Santiago. He holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Art History and Theory as well as a Master’s Degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad de Chile. Projects he has curated include the exhibition *Enclave Morse*, Sala SAM and the exhibition *Colección Vecinal*, Galería Metropolitana, in Santiago, Chile (2008); the selection *Tintes Fotográficos*, sent to ArteBA, Galería AFA, Buenos Aires; *Chille* by the artist Yoshua Okón, Galería Gabriela Mistral, Santiago, Chile; and *Colección Vecinal Caxias do Sul*, for the *7th Mercosur Biennial*, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2009). He was the editor of *De la Coca-Cola al Arte Boludo: Luis Camnitzer (1969-2006)*, published by Editorial Metales Pesados, Santiago, 2009; and he has been a speaker at a variety of conferences and events, among them the conference *Arte Chileno e intervención en el paisaje de los ochenta a la actualidad*, Museo Arte Contemporáneo, Santiago, Chile (2008); the presentation of the book *ATACAMA LAB* at Parsons University, New York, New York, USA; and the presentation of *Historia y arte: Colección Vecinal*, MARGSS, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2009).