

ERASE

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In the notes Michelle Letelier presented me on her work, there are a few words that centre me even more in what I know understand for her art. For the past two or three years I have followed her evolution in this field investigation. The words I speak of come from the industrial lexicon: “waist dump”, “deposit”, and “extraction process”. And when I speak of field investigation I associate this situation to my discovery, one made in the 80’s. A documentary material that was published in the early 70’s, but that hadn’t received any importance from those that carry art. These were the first photographs taken in the North of Chile by William Oliver during in the mid XIX. The idea I had during that time was one concerning the introduction of photography in Chile with the starting of the technological assault of the extraction industries. Definitively, both photography and the saltpetre industry were excavation technologies. For this reason, if the first incursion made by William Oliver, was that this photographer, as well as mine engineer, measured the intensity and the density of the technological intervention in photographs using the operators as a mere reference to show the magnitude of the machinery, the campaign of restitution shown by Michelle Letelier, as a visual artist, resides in one in which a decade in a mine camp grows as a symptom. Not only to show her as a position in this space of production but also to indicate the extension of a covering model and its effects defined as a “home wish” in Chilean art.

Michelle Letelier’s project is titled ERASE and it comes from an acid view on its multiple definition. On one side, you can understand it as the start in a story. “Erase una vez...”. And on the other hand, the word translated in English, to erase. Her work concentrates on the act of erasing a family space in which she gives the opportunity to pronounce it as the Spanish storytelling phrase “Once upon a time”. Taking this fable in function, the phrase makes us wonder in the habitability conditions of mining camp as an institutional concentration model. Probably, the art field, in Chile, does not go beyond the phase of camp, as a model of institutional concentration. In other words, what does not reach to resemble a city of art. Even more, when this model is affected in its decision if to remain or not in this space. The “waist dumps” cover the urban installations. The miners have been moved. The basic installations such as, housing and hospital are already covered by tons of this material. Michelle Letelier has made this register of concealment a model of exceptional work. Her studies in art give her the necessary tools to go back and intervene the memory of this occupation and not merely document the displacement.

Michelle Letelier made various records. Ones of intervention and other as the registers of these interventions. Understanding that this register establishes a first intervention that changes the stable perception of an urban memory made precarious because of its strategic reach as a production site. But the perverse side of this register operation verifies the fact of the monumental operation that must be taken in covering this camp, putting together huge forces in front of what from the artistic Chilean space is understood as an intervention of scenery. Its what can be appreciated as tons of waist material covering the hospital, to then go on to the covering of houses. One of those houses, which was her family home in this camp is house number 47, the one Michelle Letelier “invades” to give its farewell rite. This done through a “performance” in which her body validates her presence throughout her shade on a wall darkened by calamine, material installed to block the access to the house for any impertinent visitors. The presence of the artist becomes impertinent; she must register her last moment in what was once here home with the purpose of gathering the last breath of the spirit of the place. To achieve this she must mark with graphic signs the “guiltiness” of the “chosen town”. At the end of this story of production, the guiltiness rest in the possibility to convert this in residues of “working conscience”. The memory of her home IS the only one that can resist the covering, leading this to the second act of register in which she makes an inventory of the domestic artefacts in their state of total uselessness: soap dishes, washing plates, faucets, switches etc. Artefacts that show the function of flows. Today, dry objects. Condemned to total cover. Uncontinued in their function in reproducing a basic living. And finally, Michelle Letelier converts the house in a viewing point. Being that the closure of the calamine produces the effect of irregular lattices in which it is possible to fragment the stare over the the surroundings, from an emptiness of a sealed housing, as if it was a fort, a vigilance spot that no longer serves to protect, because there is nothing left to protect, just the deferred spectral memory.