

Behind every creative gesture there is a particular life that help to determine the form that gesture will take as well as the manner in which it is articulated. Naturally, there are those lives that are more interesting than others in the way they connect to concerns considered to be universal, which is just another way of saying that some people's lives are more relevant to other people's lives. But what is shared is not a series of abstract qualities represented through self-indulgent introspection (a hackneyed assumption about what it means to make art) but the political dimension that is revealed through particular biographical anecdotes experienced by specific individuals.

Michelle Letelier's trajectory as a visual artist begins with the Atacama Desert, a 1000km narrow strip of land that occupies a significant portion of her native Chile. It is the driest desert in the world – an inhospitable terrain that symbolically isolates an already geographically distant country from the rest of the world while connecting it to a global economy through the exploitation of the rich mineral deposits that lie just beneath its hard, flat surface. In the 19th and early 20th century, its principle export was sodium nitrate (used in fertilizer and gunpowder) until World War I prompted Germany to invent a synthetic version of it bringing an abrupt halt to a thriving national industry and quickly transforming once prosperous mining communities into ghost towns whose deteriorating facades today intensify an already melancholic landscape.

This poetic image of the desert was a significant reference for a previous generation of Chilean artists, known as the *avanzada*¹, and more recently figures in the writings of Roberto Bolaño – although his desert is situated in Mexico, the country where he lived in exile for many years. For Letelier, the desert is the place where she spent her adolescence, growing up in Chuquicamata, home to the largest open-pit copper mine in the world. (With the demise of sodium nitrate, copper replaced it as the country's most lucrative natural resource; the nationalization of this industry by Salvador Allende directly precipitated the coup against him.) In previous works – photographs, videos, and installations – she began documenting the gradual erasure of the 'Chuqui' mining camp, as it was fondly called, forced to close due to environmental contamination and rising fuel costs associated with the transport of waste rock to an off-site location. The decision to relocate residents to the nearby town of Calama was accompanied by a practical – if somewhat macabre – solution of disposing the waste material from the mine onto the town itself, gradually burying it under layers of rock, with the exception of the plaza, school, and church, marked for historical preservation.

In *Desarme*, 2004–2007 Letelier walks through and around the near-empty "John Bradford Houses" that comprise her former neighborhood. Images of discarded and abandoned objects in now uninhabited interiors are juxtaposed with fragments of texts taken from inventories, certificates, and other documents found amidst the rubble. Carefully arranged on the floor below the video projection is an assortment of objects – like a doll, a floppy disk, a telephone book, etc. – all metonyms for a childhood spent in a small place on the map made insignificant by the crushing weight of a landscape altered and deformed by history and economic development. Similarly, in *8 (Eight)*, 2002 – a performance registered on video – Letelier ventured into her former bedroom in House #47, where she used coal picked up off the floor, to make drawings on the wall registering her presence during the eight years she spent in that room. Other works from this period depict images of the surrounding

¹ A term coined by French born, Chilean critic and art historian Nelly Richard to refer to a seminal group of conceptual artists and writers active in the late 70s/early 80s including Carlos Leppe, Eugenio Dittborn, Lotty Rosenfeld, Diamela Eltit, and Raul Zurita among others. For further reading see: *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*, Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986.

desert and its austere beauty as it submits to exploitation and in turn subsumes the traces of that process.

In 2007 Letelier relocated to Germany, a country whose historical ties to Chile derive not from the flight of war criminals to the Southern Cone following World War II as is typically commented, but the active recruitment in the mid 19th century of German colonizers – desired for their presumably superior work ethic – to settle in the country’s southern provinces. Consistent with her long-term interest in “the social changes connected to the dismantling of a landscape,” her most recent work – drawings and paintings in coal and graphite – departs (in a manner less documentary than before) from an interest in the coal mining industry, whose slow decline is emblematic of an embattled and seemingly never-ending process of German reunification. In *Machine Studies*, 2009–2010 a series of massive mining machines appear against an empty landscape, like dinosaurs recalling a former era, while her painting series *Des Hecho*, 2009, utilizes aerial photography – a medium associated with military operations, surveillance, and real estate development – to represent the topography of the environmental devastation that, in a global economy, is perpetually displaced onto the periphery.

In Western Europe, Berlin is the city in which the East–West divide is still clearly visible – from its massive, bleak housing blocks situated in the eastern periphery to the thousands of visual artists, musicians, and writers who have flocked here during the last decade, seeking an affordable lifestyle and cosmopolitan anonymity increasingly scarce within Western capitals. If there’s something that can be characterized as the particular smell of this historical limbo, it’s that of the burning coal still used to heat a large number of pre-war buildings in the neighborhoods of the former East as well as the old western ghettos. Its absence inevitably signals gentrification – that curious process of destroying exactly what it is we seek, which is another form of colonization.

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