

Catalina Parra: Reconstructions

Julia P. Hertzberg

The art of Catalina Parra Addresses a broad range of contemporary public issues. Using images from the mass media which have dominated our visual horizons for the last century, Parra creates “reconstructions” (a term she prefers to either “collage” or “photomontage”). These reconstructions are rooted in the photomontages of the Berlin Dadaist and the legacy inherited from them by the British Pop artist, and bear out earlier twentieth- century notions that printed matter-text and image- can expand the traditional boundaries of fine art into the social and political arena. Parra’s production can be divided into three periods, which correspond to the three countries in which she has lived and worked as an artist: Germany, from 1968 to 1972, Chile from 1972 to 1980, and New York from 1980 to the present. Because her visual and written texts have been adopted from these cultures, it is important to understand something of the cultural contexts in which they are made.

Parra began her artistic career in Germany, where she lived from 1968 to 1972. Throughout Europe and the United States, the late 60s were marked by turbulent student’s unrest and increasing tension between the young and old, and Germany was no exception. To Parra, Germany seemed a place where the emphasis on order and perfection, even in daily life, was suffocating and oppressive. On the other hand, she reveals a strong aesthetic sense of order and restraint in early works such as *Nina*(1969) and *Hauptstrasse 23*(1969). Her sense of order during this period was coupled with a surprising Lyricism, which she was to abandon in favor of political content when she later returned to Chile.

Parra’s sojourn in Germany was a period of gestation, one in which the artist absorbed the many lessons of the Dada movement. In particular, Parra focused on the Art of John Heartfield, Raoul Husmann, and Hanna Hoch, and the Hanover artist Kurt Schwitters. Dada Theory maintained that traditional aesthetics should be overturned by means of an alternative language that nontraditional materials, such as found images from printed matter, should replace the easel, paint, the brush, and that art should express political injustice and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Parra’s discovery of German Dada began with her interest in the social and political aspects of modern Germany, which she had developed even before she left Chile. Soon after her arrival in Germany, she began reading about the period

leading up to and immediately following World War I, culminating in the Weimar Republic. This was a period when many artists were politically active in newly organized artists' movements, including the November group, the Working Council for Art (Arbeitsrat für Kunst) and the Dresden Secession Group. Artists were particularly involved when it came to the important job of making political posters.

The Spartacus League, which soon became the German Communist party, was one of several political parties with candidates running for the national assembly. The two leaders of the party, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, called for workers to take the revolution to the street until a true dictatorship of the proletariat was established. Two of the most important members of the Spartacus League were John Heartfield and George Grosz, also members of the Berlin Dada Club (formed on April 12, 1918).

Berlin-Dada- a politically engaged artists' movement- advocated specific political actions, such as expropriating property, providing food for the community, and building cities to light. Berlin Dadaist pioneered photomontage, whose leading practitioners were Heartfield, Grosz, Hausmann, and Hoch. "When photomontage was invented it was in the context of, although in opposition to collage. The new technique cutting up photographic images, reassembling them alongside newspaper and magazine clippings, and then writing and drawing on top of the newly created image. The effect was usually a chaotic, explosive image- a provocative dismembering of reality. Photomontage- allied to technology, mass communication and photo-mechanical reproduction- was part of the Dadaist reaction against oil painting, which they saw as essentially unrepeatable, private, and exclusive. Photomontage was passed on through the Surrealist to the British Pop artists (Richard Hamilton, for example), and later still the artist of the 1970s and 1980s, including Parra.

In the summer of 1969, without planning and yet with complete confidence, Parra began her first collages. Although the artist was already in the process of learning about dada through reading and looking at art firsthand (something she would continue to do over the next three and half years), she had not given any thought to making art in the photomontage or collage modes. The specific catalyst was the exhibition Information: Tilson, Phillips, Jones, Paolozzi, Kitaj, Hamilton, featuring work by British Pop artists. This was the first exhibition Parra had seen of media-based art, and to this day she vividly recalls it.

The Aims of Information were to document the many reactions British Pop artist had to a world increasingly dominated by mass communications. Each of the artists incorporated non art materials and nontraditional subject matter. Of the five artist in the exhibition, Kitaj and Hamilton had the strongest impact on Parra. Kitaj fragmented images and placed them in a random manner, avoiding explicit and logical narratives and inviting open – interpretations.(later Parras Chilean and New York work would employ a similar language). Hamilton applied the imagery of the mass commercial culture to painting. Two of his remarkably innovative works were collages: *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing* (1956) and *My Marilyn* (1965). The first work draws upon the world of advertising and mass media in *My Marilyn* Hamilton alters different photographic prints of the actress Marilyn Monroe by tearing and marking over them, there by omitting original details. These manipulatory procedures provided a storehouse of new ideas which Parra would consider again when she returned to Chile.

Because information came hard on the hills of Parra's recent introduction to Dada, it had a particularly deep impact on her. The design of the exhibition, which incorporated magazines, detective stories, record jackets, pictures of the Beatles from newspaper clippings- materials either actually used in the artist's works or forming part of their visual culture- also profoundly affected Parra's sensibilities. By catapulting objects from the popular culture into the world of fine Art, the Pop artist had violated the sacrosanct space of art and challenged traditional hierarchies. Similar to the earlier Dadaist, the British Pop artists attempted to make art more accessible by opening it to the immediacy and intensity of daily experience. From that summer of 1969 to the end 1972, Parra made 30 to 35 collages.

The German works were all made of found printed material from diverse sources. In *Nina and Ornamentale Variationen*(1971) text were included. In other instances, such as *Oferta de Escaparate* (1969) y *fusil a percusion* (1970) the artist drawings were used. Unlike the Dada photomontage artist, however, Parra did not actually used any actual photographs in her work. From the start she was conscious she was making art, and treated the ephemeral material in an aesthetic manner. The results were compositions that were lyrical in nature. Parra choice of images was based on private autobiographical references. In this regard, she is a kind to Schwitters whose work she believes derives its poetic aura from his delicate arrangement of the tripus.

Nina, one of Parra's first collages, demonstrates the initial steps Parra took with collage. Among the neatly cut-out images pasted to a cardboard support are a musical score from J.S. Bach shopping bag designed for a Bach festival that the artist had attended, a portrait of a young girl from a music catalogue, and a drawing by the artist of a design of one of the worlds in the Baptistery in Florence. There are works such as *Oferta de Escaparate* that incorporate Dada feature. Here, instead of the neatly arranged images we see in *Nina*, the artist experiments with overlay, illusory space, and somewhat disparate images (still juxtaposed, however, in a lyrical manner). *Fusil a Percusion* (1970) presents five images asymmetrically arranged on heavy paper. Each is linked to the other by means of multicolor lines that energized the surface and emphasized the greed organization. The unrelated images- intended to provoke new associations- include a revolver and its parts, a group of toys inspired by Paul Klee toy images, a woman's head partially obscured by a superimposed image on a kodolith, men's hands holding cigars upright in a manner resembling industrial smoke stalks, and a picture of a horse and carriage taken from a children's book.

The aggressive cropping, fragmenting, and overlaying that are typical of the explosive juxtaposition of human and machine images in Hausmann and Hoch's Dada compositions appear in Parra's art for the first time in *Lichtspiele* (1971). Parra arranged three different images of a middle- age couple vertically in the middle of the space. Each image resembles a frame in a film sequence. Parra further enhances this effect by adding a barlike stripe. Flanking the central area are blown-up details of machines. The surface was then softly colored with pencils. The work of this period in general clearly indicates that the artist's eye had become adept at selecting images from a wide variety of sources (such as music brochures, magazines, design books and Xeroxes) and then recomposing them in a result aesthetic language in which line, space, and color engaged the viewer.

Parra returned to Chile in 1972. The country was nearing chaos, with continual strikes, food and gasoline shortages, and unchecked inflation. As frustration and anger mounted, there were almost daily protest by people of all ages and economic levels. The turmoil that Parra witnessed during those first six months of 1973, which also marked Salvador Allende's final days, was new to Chile. With a heightened sense of political awareness from her years in Germany, and sensing the inevitability of a coup, Parra began saving the clippings of text and photographic material from the newspaper *El Mercurio* for assemblage.

One such early attempt, intended to chronicle the events, was particularly prescient. In an Untitled work Parra took ten or so sections of an *el Mercurio* issue that featured a large front-page photo of a stadium in Santiago where the military brass had called an important meeting. She hanged those sections from wooden rods arranged in the position of a library newspaper rack. Works such as these signaled the emergence of a political voice and a critical attitude. A few months after the coup, the artist made a series of small collages which were kept hidden in a notebook. Because of the inflammatory nature of images of the military would have been censored by the authorities, Parra entrusted the notebook to her friend.

The content form, and technique of Parra's Chilean work developed along lines very different from the preceding German period. Whereas the German works had made personal associations with the fragmented, found images, the Chilean works combined different new items in order to protest political conditions under the Pinochet regime. In so doing, Parra was inspired by John Heartfield's photomontages of the 1930s, which had aggressively denounced the National Socialist. Throughout those years the German *monteur*, as he referred to himself, had criticized Nazi atrocities in a pugnacious but straightforward manner through the assemblage of news items. The force of his work had an impact on the Chilean artist, who was never the less forced to chart a different course. Her reassembled news images were less explicit than Heartfield's. They required deciphering-making connections among none-narrative images that, in point of fact, originally illustrated different context from those into which they were subsequently reconstructed. Although Parra's German and Chilean work both used found images from printed matter and employ a scissor-and-paste technique characteristic of collage, the compositional organization in the Chilean works changed significantly, as did her choice of materials, their application, and their meaning.

It bears pointing out that very few people saw Parra work from early 1973 until late 1977. She was not part of any local art scene. On the contrary she worked in relative isolation. The few people that saw her work were for the most part the members of a small reading group to which she belonged: Eugenio Dittborn a painter; Enrique Lihn, a poet; Adriana Valdes, a professor of literature and an art critic; and Corina Valle, an artisan. Parra was also involved with two literary publications, *Manuscritos* and *V.I.S.U.A.L.* The artist designed the magazine *Manuscritos*, which published the writings of a prestigious

group of writers. Visual was formed around 1976 for the purpose of publishing literary texts and catalogs.

The content of the catalogs were as startling as the work themselves. The cover illustration set the dramatic tone for the exhibition of Parra. It showed a scene of firefighters rescuing victims from a catastrophic flood that left hundreds wounded and homeless in Santiago. The catalog itself was filled with images of wounded people undergoing surgical and other medical procedures. In order to speak of the pain and suffering cause by the silencing of Democracy, the artist invented a language of double meaning, an esoteric language that unsuspectingly drew upon the thing of the Myth of the Imbunche. The old Araucanian tale, which comes in many versions, tells of a creature whose bodily orifices have been sewen shut to prevent the suspected evil from expressing itself by being silenced(the creature Imbunche) was ironically converted into a seer.

There were Twenty- four works in the exhibition. These included collages, mixed media wallpieces (Walter Benjamin and Double o Nada), and free standing structures(Cordero de Dios). The collages were made from photographic images for the most part found in the newspaper El Mercurio. The found Photographs never documented actual political situations and were therefor not politically sensitive to the authorities. Only as (re) assemblages were they alluding to the repressive political conditions of those years. By using the methods relating to the Imbunche tale the artist devised a formal language with which to draft (ingertar) and/or join (unir) the disparate images. It is important that rather than merely pasting or gluing, the artist sews, (coser), stitches (suturar), patches (parchar) and wraps (envolver) images (or objects) to the support. Thread, cord, and pieces of color adhesive tape are not, merely the mark of the artist hand or a simple formal aesthetic maneuver, however, for they add significantly to the image of the final image. Given the political context of Imbunches one clearly needs to go beyond the interpretation of the military authorities, who in all probability understood the work merely as a harmless reconfiguration of a contemporary still-life.

The exhibition was a milestone in the artist career. First, it signaled Parra's official entry into Chiles artistic life, making her the third member in her family to do so. Second it was the first to show disguised political art during the Pinochet dictatorship. The political content of the works was not detected by the authorities, who had been accustomed to seen explicit and straightforward imagery. Parra had worked around the constraint of censorship by establishing an alternative mode of

discourse a veiled language of metaphoric protest.

This was the language developed to new heights after her move to New York in 1980. Feeling the need for a fresh start the artist applied for and received a Guggenheim Fellowship which made the move possible. Since her arrival in New York, her reconstructions have continued to evolve in visually engaging and intellectually compelling ways. The subject matter continues to come from the pages of the daily press and weekly magazines. In reassembling familiar images, Parra aims to foster new meanings that challenge the viewer to rethink the social, economic, political, and even philosophical issues to which these images refer. These include all the issues that have engaged the nation's attention over the last decade: political hegemony and military intervention (What's it to you, after the contras are gone); political accountability (testimony, keep it clean); economic disequilibrium (do they, 97%) Hunger and poverty (We are not afraid to say it, Hombre Nuevo/Hambre nueva); Nuclear Power (13 ways to reach top talent) Environmental issues (If you like this planet); American hostages (Welcome Home); Child abuse (missing children); AIDS (whose next); prodemocratic reforms in Eastern Europe (We are ready to warn you Up); financial buy-outs (Just another friendly takeover, The Human Touch: the Final Edge and the human touch : The financial edge); and budget deficits (the E(x)ternal debt).

In New York, Parra has continued to use many materials and techniques she used in Chile. The New York Times, of course, has replaced El Mercurio as the favored source for printed matter. Other materials include xrays, actual photographs, and advertising posters from bus stop light boxes. The artist's hand is intentionally evident in the sewing, stitching, and joining together of the bits and pieces of the various objects. The thread, cord, gauze, kodalith, and tape she uses create distinctive surface texture and design, as well as express a deeper metaphoric meaning.

In order to reach a fuller understanding of Parra's engagement with media texts as a precondition for creating art, this author researched the original material from the New York Times, Life Magazine, Time Magazine and Cambio, among other sources. A comparison of the appropriated images with the original ones affords us the opportunity to examine the artists working procedures, her interest in socio-political issues, and her responses to what she undoubtedly perceives as imaginative, witty, and well-designed advertising. Paradoxically, Parra makes use of the daily flow of images in order to halt or reverse the notion of the ephemeral.

The reconstructed text attempts to engage viewers, to draw them into thinking about the news of yesterday that has been superseded by the news of today.

Options (1981), continues to expand the directions noted earlier. Inspired by the front-page news story of the death of the actress Jean Seberg, the artist unites a page of the Chicago Board Options Exchanged from The New York Times together with photographic material showing a scene of men around the actress body. In the reconstruction the appropriated images are cropped and recomposed, making it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the original. For example, Parra omitted the image of the actress covered corpse. Had that been included, it might have been easier to recognize the scene, which was fairly widely reproduced. In the reconstruction, the central scene, consisting of a group of unidentified men is flanked on either end by the same image of an unidentified figure of a man at a bar. Through a deft selection and combination of images just enough narrative is retained to communicate a sense of unknown (the charts), the unidentifiable (man at a bar), and the ominous (the men's worried facial expressions). Options surpasses the specifically topical incident that brought about its inception to become a kind of reminiscence on lives unexpected and sometimes faithful turns.

What's It to You?(1982) is the first of several works to deal with U.S. political and military involvement in Central America. El Salvador had become the battleground for the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government and the Nicaragua-backed Salvadoran rebels, the Sandinistas. Charges and countercharges between the U.S. and Nicaragua over arms shipments received daily coverage in the press. On March 19, 1982, The New York Times published no fewer than six articles on the events in Central America. On that very day an advertisement in the Times, placed by CBS News for its special broadcast "Central America in Revolt" caught Parra's attention. The advertising copy had an alarming ring that seemed to echo the concern of many Americans regarding our expanding military role in that region. The first four lines read: "Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, What's it to You?" Those lines were followed by a paragraph announcing the program's aim: "To bring a clear picture of what is happening so close to our doorstep..." That paragraph was followed by the names and photographs of the four reporters together with the title, time, date, and channel of the program. The reconstruction appropriated only the first four lines of the ad copy.

Once again, Parra altered the appearance of the appropriated text. First she used paper to conceal the masthead, date, and most of the words "Guatemala" and

“El Salvador”. As a countermove, she then inserted a fragment of a second copy of the same ad at the bottom of the page so that the masthead and date, together with a small portion of the word “Guatemala,” now appeared upside down. Then she laid gauze over portions of all the words. Only the word “Nicaragua” remains partially uncovered and thus appears to peek through above the line “What’s It to You?” From behind its partial cover of gauze, this well-known quip, which lends the work its title, taunts the viewers and urges them to make American involvement in Central America their business despite the official obfuscation of the facts.

Parra again addresses the U.S./Central America debacle in two later works, *Testimony* (1987) and *After the Contras Are Gone* (1987). The text for *Testimony* came from an article from *The New York Times* on January 18, 1987. The title in the newspaper article read, “C.I.A. Recalls Costa Rica Aide.” In the appropriated text the legible part of the title reads, “A. Recalls Costa Rica Aide.” The appropriated text, enlarged from a Xerox of the *Times* article, is flanked on both ends by x-rays. The three elements are woven together with bright red thread that also crisscrosses the lines of the article making it difficult for the viewer to read. What is the nature of the printed information that has to be deciphered from behind the thread? The answer, at least in part, is testimony about secret arms deals and covert aid to the contra rebels.

In 1984 Congress had banned American military assistance to the contras, a ban that was lifted in the fall of 1986. The nation later came to learn that during these two intervening years Lt Colonel Oliver L. North and the C.I.A. had been conducting illegal activities by providing the contras with military aid. When the article “C.I.A. Recalls Costa Rica Aide” appeared in the *Times*, a net of lies was in the process of unraveling. North has lost his job as a staff member of The National Security Council of 1986, and senior C.I.A. officials were being called to testify before Congressional panels. The *Times*-article reported that the C.I.A. recalled its station chief in Costa Rica “...after allegations that he gave military and logistical advice to the Nicaraguan rebels.” That article provided one more piece of evidence that direct military aid had been supplied to the contras in defiance of the Congressional ban. Despite contrary testimony being given to the Congressional Committees, many in the nation indeed believed that covert operations were responsible for maintaining private supply networks to the contras. Parra’s engaged position implicit in the reconstruction supports this view. Accordingly, the artist’s

text, which cuts short the original one, ends with "...private supply networks for the contras." Thus the manipulated text and the specific materials, namely, the thread that covers and the x-rays that reveal, connote the actual political activity all the while testimony in Congress was denying resupplying the contras.

The artist's New York neighborhood, the Upper West Side, provides many of the materials and images that find their way into her work. Parra captures a surprisingly large number of sites along Broadway on camera, and these she synthesizes with found printed matter. *97%* (1985) is one of several works that weave together the artist's photos with seductive captions of advertising copy. The work is composed of three horizontal sections. The upper section contains a fragment from the Times with masthead and date (April 24, 1985), together with the specific text, "Find your world in ours," which was an advertisement for The New York Times. The three photographs in the middle section are taken of the Apthorp, a majestic apartment building on Broadway between 78 and 79 Streets, and mannequins in the windows of a woman's retail store on the same street. The lower section, which takes up half of the space, contains the statistic *97%*. Returning to some of the more straightforward juxtaposition of disparate images used in her early work in Germany, Parra ironically comments on economic disparities. Together the four elements suggest that only if you are one of the privileged three percent (if you are not one of the other 97%) can you find your place in the world of luxury.

The contrast between the affluent and the economically deprived continues to be the theme of two later work, *we're Not Afraid to Say It* (1990) and *Hambre nuevo - Hambre nueva* (1991). These reconstructions exemplify the creative imagination needed to transform someone else's material into an independent aesthetic, while at the same time they express profound concern for the catastrophe of famine. In *we're Not Afraid to Say It*, wealth is denoted by exotic foods, famine by starving African mothers and children trekking across the desert in search of a refugee camp. The unbreachable distance between the haves and the have not is metaphorically suggested by the vastness of the desert. Parra selected the two diverse images from popular sources: the illustration of food and its accompanying text, "We're not afraid to say it," are from a poster in a bus stop light box. The images of the African women and children appeared in *Life* magazine in the fall of 1989 in the section reviewing the decade. The reappearance of the *Life* magazine photo serves as a painful reminder of the starvation and displacement that

continues to plague many African nations.

Parra's concern with the global issue of poverty among children is the subject *Hombre nuevo-Hambre nueva*. The translation means "New Human-New Hunger." In Spanish, if the O in *hombre* is replaced by the a in *hambre*, the word "man" becomes "hunger". In English, by contrast, the text conveys the notion that for every new born child there is another mouth-body-soul to feed. The source for the image of the child holding a candle is appropriated from *Time* magazine, (October 8, 1990). The *Time* magazine issue was dedicated to America's disadvantaged minority, its children. The image in the reconstruction illustrated the article, "Suffer the Little Children," which had marked the United Nations World Summit for Children. Parra's work does not contain the numbing statistics that confirm the fact that every year more than 14 million children under 5 die of disease and malnutrition, or that horrifying numbers of them, even in advanced western democracies are victims of neglect or abuse. For Parra an image is more powerful than the actual hard numbers. She moves the viewer by means of her own recreated image, the image of a child holding a candle next to a particular poetic text. She rests the meaning in the aesthetic and poetic interplay between the two.

Catalina Parra's artistic steps began in Germany and progress through Chile to New York. Her work is conceptually rooted in the photomontages of the Berlin Dadaist, who used printed matter drawn from the here and now to express social and political content. The use of appropriated images grew in subsequent years, as can be seen in the work of certain British Pop artist. Catalina Parra, like others of her generation, has pushed the notion of appropriation even further. The artist's subjective manipulation of found photographic material and text invest them with new inferences and meanings. Through the metaphoric visual and written language of her reconstructions, we see the mind of a politically sensitive artist at the same time that we see the hand of a poetic one.

Art Historian and independent curator, Julia P. Hertzberg was one of the curators of the 1990 exhibition *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, a collaborative venture between the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum of Harlem.

