

INTERVENTIONS:
THE POLITICAL ART OF CATALINA PARRA
Jean Franco
It's Indisputable.
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Walter Benjamin once said that the eyes of modern city dwellers are “overburdened with protective functions”. He would certainly have much more to say on that subject today when the sheer proliferation of images on screens, in the sky, on buildings, in stores, and private homes often makes vision highly selective. Protecting ourselves against the bombardment of impression, we are in danger of unlearning the art of seeing. Much the same happens with other forms of communication. The printed signs, handouts, newspapers, magazines which pass before our eyes are designed precisely for a quick eyeballing that scarcely imprints them on consciousness though they continue to lurk in our minds like a haunting tune, affecting us whether we like it or not. Apparently random, these images and messages compose narratives of globalization. What are these narratives? That nature is there for our enjoyment as background to romance or playground, that the poor are anonymous, that style is everything and commodities desirable. Catalina Parra's art addresses this careless yet signifying proliferation of images and messages. Using torn fragments of illustrated magazines, photographs, newsprint, headlines, and stitching, she has put together seven series, many of whose titles (taken from newspapers) proclaim a common sense that seems beyond dispute.

The slogans- “*It's indisputable*”, “*It's uncontestable*”, “*It's incomparable*”- assert themselves over a surface of fragmented images often sutured with bold stitches.

The images themselves, torn from magazines and newspapers are both familiar and difficult to identify with any certainty. Images of nature (birds and deep sea with fish) are juxtaposed with those of war (perhaps Kosovo, but it could be any war). Who are these Asians waiting in a hanger, the people in that crowd running from gunfire, what are the burning buildings? It is doubtful whether we still attach them to some particular event- to the boat people, to Kosovo. The people in them are as anonymous as the images

of flocking birds and stampeding animals. Indeed, the very fact that they are no longer identifiable shows how rapidly they are shuffled off into some twilight zone where one Third World crisis looks very much like another and this month's ads erase the memory of last month's. Even when we might recognize an image such as the Los Angeles riots that followed on the beating of Rodney King, the event is resignified by the title- in this case, It's indisputable- which imposes certainty on a contested, a "disputable" event. These titles- *It's Indisputable* (1992); *It's Incontestable* (1992); *It's Incomparable* (1992); *No moaning, No complaints, No rehab, Just laughs* (1999);

If you can't see (1992) are newspaper headlines that evaluate while negating other opinions. In the context of Parra's art, the emphasis on the negative acquires the force of the repression that is emphasized in the recurrent image of police, soldiers, and guns. What we are seeing is the iron fist behind the freedom, and the incompatibility of elements of a global narrative that are visibly stitched together.

The drabness of many of the news photographs contrast with the brightly colored pieces torn from advertisements, showing clothes, furniture and sometimes nothing at all, just color. Nor can we escape from this world of commodities into nature, since nature too is packaged and sold. The highly colored images of mountains and lush natural scenery are, after all, the images we construct of nature as a selling point.

In the series *If you can't see* (1992) the headline is printed in fonts that diminish in size like the letters on an oculist's chart. Beneath them sutured with hospital tape, are images of hunger and manual labor taped to brilliantly colored advertisements of strawberries and asparagus. I was reminded of a famous photography exhibition, *The Family of Man*, that was shown in several countries soon after World War II and in which difference was subsumed under the universality of the human experience.

"*Seeing*" humanity as a family is a way of not seeing these other images of dire inequality- a hungry child eating out of a bowl, men sifting for gold. In one of the pieces, the child is smothered by the cornucopia of fruit. In another, the face is barred by the spacing between the images. Hunger and violence are at once obvious and invisible. Pleasure in abundance is a form of blindness.

Stitching, suturing, pinning and taping are used in several different ways- to connect and disconnect. The manual activity of sewing intervenes in the collation of images, inserting the usually absent reference to manual labor in the new economic order. It precariously holds together disparate images in which anguish and anonymity co-exist with the world's riches. In some of

the pieces, stitching is used to emphasize barriers, to mark spaces between different realities. The series *No moaning, No complaining, No rehabs, Just Laughs* (1999) focuses on Pinochet's public image, which was so devastatingly destroyed by his arrest. Here, the stitches "tie" the hands of the guilty. In "*How do you measure up*"?, there are specks of blood- results of the stitching.

In this latter series "measure" ironically refers to quantifying the unquantifiable. Images of boat people waiting, or of prisoners are placed underneath a ruler.

Fragments of the phrase "Can't commit" overlay the other images. Against what abstract standard are these people being measured? How do you commit to an abstraction? What we are left with is guilt without measure. Catalina Parra, a Chilean, has lived in the global city of New York for eighteen years and, like many immigrants, the disparities of her daily life between here and there cannot be resolved into a tidy narrative. Although she is not relating a personal story the series "*Photographic Memories*" (1998) refers to a visit to her native country. In this series she places photographs of Chile often taken from a car at twilight at the top or bottom of the space. Many of these photographs are of anonymous roads or empty countryside. The absence of people voids the photographs of memory. If such places have any meaning for her, their significance cannot be conveyed to viewers; like all personal memories their emotive meaning is not necessarily transmissible, reminding us that the relation between photograph and memory is far from straightforward. We photograph in order to remember but the photograph is spectral and evokes forgetting as much as memory or at best, evokes something that was not in the photographer's mind. Often photographs register death more than life. "*Photographic Memories*", the private record marks a border around the public space of news, commerce and surveillance- a bare arm emerging from a green cloth, a baseball player, a man holding binoculars. The spaces are filled with newsprint and pages from the Starr report on the Clinton investigation; stitches border the brilliant colors of advertisements, compartmentalizing the images that now occupy the public sphere. It is as if this cacophony blots out any affective and human content.

In the installation which is part of the exhibition dried fish sewn into plastic bags that have been placed under a cascade of steel chains that looks like a waterfall in a continuation of the theme of the impoverishment of nature that recurs throughout the exhibition. The plastic imprisons the dry fish; it is, in Benjamin's words, a "protective function" that insulates the already dead sensations.

The exhibition raises the question of the nature of political art in a globalized world in which vast populations and vast areas are invisible. It is not just a question of seeing them but of seeing them in a relationship to our own surplus enjoyment. The exhibition alerts us to the danger of a global public sphere in which only commerce has a voice.