

Catalina Parra

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Jean Franco

FOSA/Catalog article

The title of Catalina Parra's video installation FOSA shot in 2005 in the Atacama Desert in Chile is the unequivocal reminder that it was the tomb, graveyard and sepulcher of several hundred men and women who were "disappeared" by the military during the Pinochet regime. In this brief video we confront not Žižek's "desert of the real" but the real of a desert where rain never falls and nothing grows where the few human traces are of nomadic tribes and the disinterred bones of the recent dead.

A wind blows incessantly over the barren landscape whose only trace of civilization is The Monument to the Disappeared. Parra's installation shows a mechanical shovel excavating and filling sacks with dirt, as the desert becomes a stage of simulation of production. The sound track is the monotonous grind of the machine and the only human presence is the machine's operator.

The video is a literal representation of mechanical production in which the human is reduced to performing a robotic function whose product is dirt. The grinding monotony of the machine moving dirt from one place to another underscores the monotony of work and the fact that the worker is now no more than the extension of the machine, controlled by the machine as much as he controls it. The worker no longer packages new products but simply harvests desert dust. Absent from the video but evoked by the work of excavation is the desert's major industry, the U.S. owned Chuquibambilla copper mine.

Parra has spoken of the difficulty of working in the desert. "The wind was so ferocious, the terrain was so hard with layers and layers to break up that I realized how the work functions as a perfect metaphor for what Chile is to me: that land so hostile from every direction that its inhabitants work hard, to break into it and make it habitable in any way they can, searching for interstices. "Yet more than the hardship of labor, what the video shows is what work has become- a mechanical task whose product serves no vital purpose.

The sacks of dirt are strangely humanoid or as Ronald Christ described them, they are "rudely stacked (non bodies lie dirt dead in a cavity) slowly filled with their own matter". The tied up sacks recall the mythological *imbunche* of Chilean folklore that Parra described in reference to a 1977 exhibition. The *imbunche* is "the person who has all body orifices sewn shut,

all the holes blocked so that the evil spirits can't get out of his body, so it's a kind of censoring of release".

Compressed in those sacks figures is the hidden history of the men and women who were killed and buried in the desert in the belief that they would then be forgotten and that the national amnesia decreed by the Pinochet regime and later, by the coalition government.

La Concertacion would guard the secret of their deaths. The Monument to the Disappeared, visible as a patch in the horizon, symbolizes the other history, the history that includes the suppression of all the dissidence, the extermination of the opposition and a government dedicated to reinventing the nation as a neoliberal paradise. The distant monument is the visible sign of the end of an era of utopian promise that would be replaced with regimes that wanted no reminders of the past

FOSA (2005) is a document of the third version of this excavation that was first realized in Lexington New York. In this first version, there was no mechanical shovel and the excavation was done manually. A second version in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1981 was situated near a river. But, it is the Chilean installation that is the most complex.

In her collages, Parra exploited ambiguity. In the FOSA video installation, the spectator is put to work as he or she processes a rich array of meanings, from the recovery of the past to the exploitation of the soil, while the sound track – the grating noise of the machine – emphasizes dissonance.

In her collages, Parra deployed irony and ambiguity by using diverse forms of language including newspapers headlines, poster announcements and simple ironic comments. In FOSA, it is up to the spectator to deconstruct the multiple strands that link extraction, excavation, exhumation, exposure, exploitation and even exhibition.

(Jean Franco has been at Columbia University since 1982, first in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and later in The Department of English and Comparative Literature. She is at present working on a book with the title "Cruel Modernity")