

## IT'S INDISPUTABLE

Jersey City Museum

## RUN AWAY, RUN AWAY

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Catalina Parra moved back to Chile at the end of 1972 after having lived in Germany for several years. She returned to her country of origin during the politically troubled period of President Salvador Allende's final months when the deteriorating political, economic, and social conditions were creating a sense of chaos throughout the country. Although, in the ensuing months, Parra began to sense an impending military intervention, she could not have imagined that Chile, a country with a long tradition of democracy, would be totally convulsed by a military *coup d'état*. On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the elected government, closed Congress, and suspended the constitution. Parra has never forgotten her anguish upon learning of Allende's suicide, the bombing of the presidential palace, and the declaration of the state of siege. In the immediate aftermath of the military takeover, word spread concerning the disappearances, tortures and killings of the opposition. Parra began to chronicle the day-to-day events with clippings of texts and photographic material from *El Mercurio*, the leading Santiago newspaper. What began as a strategy for coping turned into an art project when Parra edited and reassembled that material into a series of small collages that contained imagery of the military. Those early montages were among the first examples of Parra's work in Chile to speak with a political and critical voice.

From that time to the present, the artist has found her subject matter in the pages of the print media-whether in the form of clever advertisements, seductive news reporting, thought-provoking editorials, or captivating imagery. Continuing to expand on a classic, modernist photomontage mode, Parra edits, alters, and re-presents topical and global news on a two-dimensional surface. Her resulting "reconstructions" set into opposition social, political, and economic news confronting us on a daily basis, without strict regard to time or place.

In this exhibition, the seven series, consisting of a total of seventy individual

works, present catchy titles taken from *The New York Times*. (Throughout most of the 1990 Parra worked in series, each comprised of ten individual works.) The artist characteristically used a full-page ad from *The New York Times*, which she attached to heavy white paper board. Leaving the headlines visible, she then covered the rest of the page with overlapping layers of found texts and images attached by gluing, sewing and pinning, emphasizing her own montage techniques in artmaking. The headlines of the ads became the titles of the series, including *It's Indisputable* (1992); *It's Incontestable* (1992); *If you can't see* (1992); *It's Incomparable* (1993); *Photographic Memories*(1998);*How do you measure up*(1999); *No moaning. No complaining. No rehabs Just laughs* (1999); and *Run Away, Run Away* (1999). Excerpted from its original context, the ad copy, in combination with additional imagery and texts, imparts new meanings. The overall peremptory language of these seventy titles commands attention, enticing the viewer to examine the details of the texts and subtexts closely. The linguistic play of words confers a sense of the absolute, the autocratic. One of Parra's great strengths lies in her ability to redefine messages from commercial texts, some of which were originally written for their persuasive content in the advertising world. In the process of altering and manipulating found copy, the artist deconstructs its former intent and reinvests it with an alluring appeal.

That allure is nowhere more evident than in the series titled *Run Away, Run Away*. The headline copy appeared in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, December 30, 1998. The subject addresses the legal predicament of General Augusto Pinochet following his arrest in London on October 16, 1998. The words "Run Away" have an enticing ring, both as a verb and a noun, denoting either the act of flight or escape or the person fleeing or escaping.

When the unexpected news of Pinochet's detention was announced, the artist felt the full flush of post-Pinochet trauma. Within days, Parra began collecting articles on the general's arrest from the print media. As a member of the group of intellectuals called the *Referente* (a special meeting place), the artist received articles and commentaries via email concerning the events simultaneously unfolding in Spain, the United Kingdom, and Chile. In their voluminous email correspondence, the group of writers, professors, political scientists, graduate students, and filmmakers discussed immunity questions, sovereignty issues, and the *Concertacion's* fear of the Chilean military and the potential effects of those issues in the world. Parra incorporated fragments from the *Referente's* email

correspondence into the different works of the series. Her decision to do so indicates the importance she gave Chilean voices, who were in the process of reexamining the ramifications of the legal proceedings that would ultimately affect Chile's transition to democracy at a crucial moment in its history.

Although Parra began the actual assemblage of the series after she came across the ad copy "Run Away Run Away" at the end of December, the conceptual process was already under way by late October. It appears that she finished the series by mid-February, prior to the decision by the House of Lords (March 1999) that Pinochet could be subject to prosecution, that is, his claim of immunity was denied. During that four-month period, there were several court hearings and decisions that ruled both in favor of and against Pinochet's immunity. Parra's texts reveal and conceal many details of the legal case as it evolved during that time; nonetheless, she offers the spectator a sense of heightened emotion felt by those who followed the developments in the media.

*No.1 of Run Away, Run Away* begins with Pinochet's defiant words, "Only Chile Can Judge Me", and *No 10* ends with a humbler image of a man in a wheelchair. The other works encapsulate many moments of high expectation in the legal case (at least from the perspective of Pinochet's supporters). The first text in *No 1* comes from an article in *The New York Times International* Saturday, December (the day and year have been cut off), which reads: "Only Chile Can Judge Me, Pinochet Tells British Court ." The article reported Pinochet's brief appearance in court on December 11 (1998), during which he refused to recognize the right to be tried by any court outside Chile. In constructing the visual counterpoints to that printed, collaged element, Parra inserted a photograph she took of Wewelsburg, a beautiful medieval castle, now a war museum, in Germany. Wewelsburg had been the training center for the spiritual enlightenment of Hitler's elite imperial guard, the SS, under Heinrich Himmel. When the artist visited the castle, she felt a sense of dread, an emotion not unlike the one she felt upon learning about places like Villa Grimaldi, a well-known place in Santiago, where the Chilean military interrogated, tortured and killed prisoners after the military coup. In an attempt to make certain associations, to remind people of places where crimes against humanity had been carried out, and to communicate her own feelings concerning the Pinochet drama the artist inserted photos of Wewelsburg in most of the works. Some of the shots of the interior and the exterior of the castle seem innocent at first glance. They become less innocent, however, when the eye happens upon the

image in *No 5* of the vault and the guardhouse, with the accompanying text “Wewelsburg 1933-1945 Kult- un Terrorstatter der SS” (Cult and Terror State of the SS)

*No 2* captures the range of emotions of both the general’s supporters and the opponents when on December 17 (1998) the Law Lords ruled that Pinochet could have a new hearing to determine his immunity from prosecution. That decision overturned an earlier one (November 25) by the High Court that had found Pinochet not immune from prosecution as a former head of state. Parra appropriated a text and image from *The New York Times International*, Friday December (date cut out): “Supporters of Gen Augusto Pinochet in Santiago, Chile, celebrated the decision by the Law Lords yesterday to hold a new hearing on whether he has immunity. In London, opponents of the general protested. “Next to the image of the supporters, Parra used red thread and sewed an image of a protester in London carrying a placard with the words: “Law Lords Blood on your hands” The two images were assembled on top of a large fragment of the hard copy of an email sent to Parra by a member of the *Referente*. The artist left the header, “12/18/98 America Online: Catparra Page 5,” as a means of identifying the source and recipient. The partial commentary in the email provides glimpses of some of the legal arguments therein discussed.

*No 3* features a fragment of the Chilean flag pinned to the edge of the paper as a border for Isabel Allende’s front- page article in *The New York Times Magazine*, January 17, 1999, “Pinochet Without [Hatred].” Parra left some of the text under the title and then collaged another fragment which contains the beginning of the article: “Many years ago, I [was asked whether I planned someday to write a novel] about Pinochet. No, I said [because as a character he was insignificant. I need to retract that] statement: one ca[n say anything about him except that he is insignificant...].” Allende, a well-known Latin American writer, is the niece of President Salvador Allende. Her account provides a critical history, indeed, a counter- history of the Pinochet legacy. In eliminating the final word [hatred], Allende’s title begs completion. Many thoughts come to mind. Pinochet without his country, without his military, without his political clout, without immunity, without amnesty. If, finally, one considers the meaning suggested by the image of the empty sentry house at Wewelsburg, one is tempted to complete the title with “Pinochet without His Guards.”

The brilliant series *Run Away, Run Away* was created in response to the initiation

of a process of using legal means to judge a former ruler for crimes against humanity. Parra became reengaged in a passionate issue that provided her a singular opportunity to create a new mediatic context to express her views on art, life, and the political conditions upon which the two are contingent.