

Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende: the History of a Collection.

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Generally speaking, the way a museum uses its collections is an indication of its true character. A museum does not put all the works in its holdings on display, and the reason is not just a lack of exhibition space but also the concept behind the exhibitions that it can mount. There is thus a dialectic between what is shown and what is preserved. This means that the strength of a museum is measured in terms not of what it exhibits, but of what keeps it going. All the more so when the museum is a special institution like the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (The Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum), because the story of its creation is quite out of the ordinary. What sustains it is a concept of political and cultural solidarity that has roots going back to the early 1970s, which leads us to wonder about the permanency of this concept in the field of politics. First of all, there is the solidarity with a political process represented by the figure of President Allende, and thus solidarity with the struggle to regain freedom, and lastly, solidarity with the production of memory.

A museum like this cannot reject its own role in the work of rebuilding the concept of citizenship, and all this makes the Museo Allende an extraordinary place: first of all because it was set up at an extraordinary time in the political history of the country and, secondly, because the way it took shape was extraordinary in the history of the creation of museums.

Here I am talking of collections in the plural, because there are two key moments in their history: the first, in 1971-1973, in Santiago, and the second, as from 1974, abroad. The latter was a campaign of acquisitions that lasted until the 1980s. The former created the Solidarity Museum, as part of Operación Verdad (Operation Truth); while the second, as one might expect, was when the Museum became known as the Museo de la Resistencia (the Resistance Museum). Later on, the two collections came together in what are now the holdings of the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende.

The memory of the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende is ensured by the mobility of its management and the need it feels to be in close contact with the world of Latin American art, which is what we do when we show the exhibition in the SESI gallery in Sao Paulo and in the Museo Oscar Niemeyer in Curitiba. The fact that the museum should take off in two Brazilian cities is explained by the way the museum originally came about, and by the presence of Mario Pedrosa. The great Brazilian critic was in exile in Chile at the time and it was his international prestige and

the clarity of his cultural position that helped him give shape to the first collection.

To give an idea of Mario Pedrosa's role and point of view, I should like to relate an anecdote I find particularly significant. Mario Pedrosa decided to write a letter to Picasso when strategic bombing had started up over North Vietnam. He made a very simple statement, saying it was necessary to move *Guernica* to Santiago in Chile, where an extraordinary experiment in social and political development was taking place. This was because the United States no longer deserved to host the work, for every day they were subjecting some population or other around the world to a bombardment like that of Guernica. He really did write the letter and it was to be distributed among artists so that they could sign it. The original document is now in the museum archives, testifying to the attempts to achieve cultural independence at the time. To understand this, one must inevitably refer to the political position of anti-imperialism. Chile had become a platform of hope for a new policy, and not even the political class of Chile understood its real potential.

In order to comprehend the historical weight of the moment that led to the formation of the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, we need to place the anecdote about Mario Pedrosa and the visit by Gordon Matta-Clark to Chile in the same perspective.

Gordon Matta-Clark visited Chile in May 1971, when he was on a trip to South America with his friend Jeffrey Lew. He had already created *Foods* before he set out, and he had written a letter-manifesto in which he asked US artists to boycott the Sao Paulo Biennale, to protest against the Brazilian dictatorship. His idea was to set up a sort of "counter-Biennale" in Santiago, though this plan never took off. He did however work in the basement of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, while Jeffrey Lew excavated the main entrance hall of the building, just where Roberto Matta had prepared his canvases in November 1970.

Roberto Matta had gone to Santiago that month to attend the ceremony to appoint Salvador Allende as President of the Republic, and he remained in the country until the end of March 1971. At the beginning of his stay, he made some paintings using earth, chalk and straw, with the help of some builders who were restoring the museum. According to him, these paintings represented the structure of an adobe wall of a Chilean peasant home, whitewashed with lime, on which he then traced out the anthropomorphic signs that were to become characteristic of that period.

In view of the excessive denotation of Roberto Matta's painting, Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark criticised the very foundations of the art institution and it was this that constituted the great divergence at the time. While Matta illustrated the position of those who, in his opinion, had no

voice of their own, Matta-Clark adopted a situationist stance of institutional criticism, upsetting the very foundations of cultural transfer, for he worked in the basement of a building that was itself the copy of a prototypical museum: the Petit Palais in Paris.

Matta-Clark's visit to Santiago was to remain invisible to local art circles, and also to later historians. It is only recently that the publication of the Phaidon volume on Matta-Clark edited by Corinne Diserens has included photographs of that work of his. In addition to this, there was the exhibition entitled *Transmisión: the Art of Roberto Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark*, curated by Betti-Sue Hertz in August 2006 at the San Diego Art Museum in California. This incident between Matta and Matta-Clark is a key example. Both of them – father and son – worked on the same place, just a few months apart, in the same year, without meeting each other.

Their non-encounter was not just filial, but institutional. Both worked in a museum that had been built to celebrate the centenary of the Republic. It was the museum that the oligarchy – to which Matta belonged – had built for itself to celebrate its own policies. In this shrine to aristocratic vanity, Matta went against the memory of his tribe by painting a work that referred to the rural world that the dominion of his class of origin had been based on. Matta-Clark, on the other hand, worked on the foundations and created a work in the basement, thereby threatening to undermine his father's protest.

Having failed to prevent Allende's accession to the presidency of the republic, the State Department and multinational corporations worked together in 1971 to organize a widespread media boycott on reporting from Chile. This is what intelligence jargon refers to as "information intoxication". At that moment, the Allende government invited intellectuals and artists to Chile so that they could find out themselves what was going on in the country, and then refer back to their own countries and governments.

It was in this situation that critics and artists decided to go beyond mere reporting. In order to assist Allende's government in its struggle against the manipulation of information by the US and trans-national corporations, they decided to make a gesture of solidarity, donating works of art that would serve as the basis for the creation of a museum.

What is important here is to point to a situation in which some artists carried out an act of protest against the use of information, donating works in order to set up a museum. More strictly speaking, I would like to think that it is a "curious" case that, though indirectly, pitted artists against the media. The donation of works of art constitutes proof of a "truth" that the media were covering up and manipulating. The paradox lies in the fact that the creation of a museum, as an

institutional act, arose from a gesture in favour of the freedom of information. While in other parts of the world, some works by the avant-garde bring into question the legitimacy of museums, in those places where the history of museums is incomplete, the desire for one becomes an absolute imperative. This is rather strange, to say the least, in the history of contemporary art museums. Thus it was that works were quickly gathered and the first collection was put on show, with works by Miró, Calder, Stella, Monory, Rancillac, Adami, Velickovic, Vostell, Vasarely, Tapies, Canogar, and Genovés, to mention but a few.

There is thus a historical collection that consists of the first phase of donations, making Santiago home to a transversal cross-section of a highly significant moment in contemporary production. But the military coup in 1973 put the museum, and Chilean society as a whole, into a state of emergency. Throughout the dictatorship, the collection remained in the basement of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of Chile, which was in the hands of the military. However, in 1974, the exiled museum was renamed "Museo de la Resistencia" and a second phase of collections of works got under way, lasting until the early 1980s. The two collections were brought together under the same roof in 1991, when the Democratic Transition was already in full swing, and it became the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende.

The museum now houses a collection of more than two thousand works and is located in Calle República, in a district that, in the early twentieth century, was occupied by the oligarchy but whose external appearance has changed totally, and indeed it is now a university district. The former mansions are now university buildings, and those that have been pulled down have made way for expansion of the facilities. The building that is now home to the Museum dates from the 1920s. In the 1940s it was the Spanish embassy, and in 1969 it was taken over by the Universidad de Chile for its Department of Humanist Studies. The department stayed there until 1976, when the building was requisitioned by the military and used for the Central Nacional de Inteligencia. A vast wiretapping system was installed in the basement.

The building was abandoned in the early years of the democratic transition. Secret-service agents applied a scorched-earth policy but did not manage to cancel all the traces. The ruins and remains speak for themselves and restoration work has made it possible to reconstruct its history. It has been decided to leave intact one highly symbolic room, which is where the electronic surveillance equipment was installed.

To understand the present constitution of the Museum, it is necessary to bear in mind the institutional configuration that makes this place so extraordinary: the same building houses a

memorial, a museum of the site and a museum of contemporary art. And this is the conceptual, political and institutional challenge faced by this museum. For it is no ordinary art museum. The vicinity of the other two spaces – the memorial and the museum of the site – make it like no other. It gives us an idea about the representation of the memories of art and the collective action of some historic personalities who were forced to pay such a high material and symbolic price.