

Our Destiny is Our Own: Secrets From the Street*

By Carlos Motta

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*[...] The secret¹ is that culture is a secret in divided societies. That culture is a secret in class societies. There is a culture on the streets and a culture behind closed doors [...] The secret is about the battle over who owns the streets; who writes on the streets [...] Who publicizes one's struggles in the streets [...] The secret is who uses the street as a forum, like a "Democracy Wall," because other control the "legitimate" media of public disclosure [...] The secret is that there is more than one public ... the public forced to exhibit its private life in the street and the public that calls the police to clear the streets [...]*²

Brigadas Ramona Parra know the *secret* and they have consistently organized to disclose it.

For thirty years, this militant artistic collective has marked the Chilean streets with richly layered mural paintings composed of popular iconographic signs often accompanied by phrases of opposition to the exploitation of a political, economic, military and social elite over a vast majority of Chile's citizens. To this aim, they have used the language of (revolutionary) art to support or denounce political ideologies. Brigadas Ramona Parra has claimed and re-appropriated public space as a site for contestation, *direct* democratic dialogue and political debate, despite threats, censorship and prosecution.

Faithful to their belief in the building of "a great utopia,"³ Brigadas Ramona Parra has witnessed and participated both in the times of optimism and the darkest hours Chilean history. As a young group it actively advocated the socialist project of the democratically elected president Salvador Allende by agitating and distributing political propaganda to develop social consciousness. After Allende's *defeat*, Brigadas attempted to *expose* with their brushes the repressive military regime of Augusto Pinochet. The message was clear: reject the treason of all governmental institutions toward its citizens and their alliance with the forces of U.S. imperialism, which driven by economic/political interests supported the *coup*. This ideological

* The first part of the title is taken from one of Brigada's murals in Santiago and the second part is from Martha Rosler's 1980 video *Secrets From the Street: No Disclosure*. Thanks to Martha Rosler for lending me the transcript of her video, from which I borrowed the concept of the *secret*.

¹ Italics mine.

² Martha Rosler, transcript of video *Secrets From the Street: No Disclosure*, 1980.

³ Idea expressed by Beto Pastene from Brigadas Ramona Parra in an e-mail exchange.

determination and political commitment made Brigadas "the enemy," which forced some of its members into exile to escape being "disappeared" by the totalizing regime. Weakened but not silenced, the group continued to *disclose the secret*. Brigadas' struggle today is that of speaking out against the consequences of neo-liberal globalization and of a *false democracy*.⁴

Brigadas Ramona Parra's murals kick doors open to render visible the historical depth and repressive nature of a class society. Their mural "Saqueando nuestra historia" (on view at Beaufort03), for example, presents a chronological narrative of the pilfering of *our* history from the perspective of dominated groups (starving Indians, landless peasants, exploited workers⁵, etc.) from the times of the conquest to colonization, from the years of military repression to present day *democracy*. Their graphic representations are drawn from a public imaginary associated with the Latin American struggle for liberation, a continental oppositional social *movement* that has largely developed in the streets since the late 1950s in an attempt to break down glass buildings that let *us* see through them, determine the course *our* life with their reflection, but never let *us* belong.

Brigadas Ramona Parra write an elegy of identification to those that recognize the recurrent ideological obstacles to build a free, inclusive and truly democratic society.

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⁴ Unpublished interview with Brigadas Ramona Parra by a Brazilian friend of the group.

⁵ Descriptions used by Ché Guevara during a 1957 public speech in Havana, Cuba.