

Interview with Mariana Silva by Carlos Motta

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"Archivo: Documento Biográfico de Los Habitantes de Chile" ("Archive: Biographical Document of the Inhabitants of Chile"), a project by Chilean artist Mariana Silva is constituted of autobiographical letters solicited from the general public through flyers distributed directly on the streets, posters hung in public spaces, and through an ad published in a newspaper of national circulation. Subsequently, the letters were inserted by various voluntary collaborators in letterboxes installed in subway stations or sent directly to the artist by normal and electronic mail.

Mariana Silva also traveled the country during these months recording interviews on video. She covered the most remote populated towns: From Visviri in the north to Antarctica in the south, as well as many cities in between. Fondart and the contribution of many enterprises and institutions provided the funding. The result of this project was built into an interactive computer system (CD-ROM), through which the public is able to access to the letters, photographic documentation of Silva's travels, and the video interviews.

Carlos Motta: Your artistic formation took place during the dictatorship. Could you describe this moment and the influence that it exerts on your thinking and practice?

Mariana Silva: The truth is that for those of us who grew up and were raised during the dictatorship, without being directly affected by the political disappearance or murder of our immediate family members, it took a long time to realize how it had affected our every day life. Though the dictatorship and the fight against it were a scenario that affected all of us equally. However, I never approached it as the central problem or the cause of my work. Besides, my personal situation at the time didn't allow me to participate in student organizations.

CM: "Archivo: Documento Biográfico de Los Habitantes de Chile" ("Archive: Biographical Document of the Inhabitants of Chile") is a work that, without implying a direct reference to the dictatorship and its social consequences, insinuates with its thousands of voices, a "liberation" from this phenomenon on the part of its participants. How did this project and your position as mediator/author of this group of personal testimonies germinate?

MS: In fact, my work "Documento Biográfico" can be read from its political effects, especially because of the necessity of a restitution of memory in a country in which history and the press were, for so many years, censored by the State. However, these are effects of the work that have emerged from outside of my creative process. These are aspects that I neither direct nor consciously control.

As I mentioned earlier, it might be that these correspond to that profound reflection that originated in the environment I had to live in, not to a political intentionality of the work. Besides, I want to make clear that the need for a "liberation" that this work triggers goes beyond any political bias of its participants. I am interested in life stories, and in these the country's national life is only one of the many aspects that go through any person's life.

I regard myself as a mediator between these anonymous and normal people that are exposed in the letters and in the work of art, and I can say that it corresponds to a personal position in relationship to the work. For me, art should be interwoven with the matter and texture of life itself. If my work uses as material something as delicate as people's experiences, thoughts and emotions, I can't take a different role than that of a mediator, to protect the beautiful relationship that is produced between the people and art.

Ultimately the practice of art is an act of giving with which people that agree to participate may integrate; this has always been a constant in my work.

CM: "Documento Biográfico" has thousands of authors, styles, typographies, narratives, etc. It is a work in which the conventional notions of authorship and style of an art project are challenged and questioned. It could be said that its author is "invisible" and its form tangential. Is there something you were trying to rescue through the Chilean people, something that has remained (perhaps) in silence?

MS: The notion of authorship might seem "invisible" because it was done with the convergence of many voices, writings and typographies. Nonetheless, I know for certain that a work of this sort can only be made from a particular perspective. These things have occupied my mind and spirit through my whole life's work. "Documento Biográfico" could only be made from the sphere of art, because if you gave the work an intentionality that is distant from art, it could hardly obtain the response that this call received. Therefore, the appearance or absence of the author, in this case, operates as a paradox.

My idea was not to rescue the people of Chile in an abstraction sense. My idea was to withdraw myself from any generalized or uniform concept in regard to the people that form the reality of the country. The concept of people, being a very beautiful concept and a loaded one for our history, was here disintegrated into hundreds of individual voices, for which it was necessary to create a technological mechanism of presentation that would protect them as such.

CM: One could affirm that this work is a historical monument, without its common characteristics. Was "the monument" something you were interested in and was this idea part of your creative process?

MS: This work knocks down the concept of monumentality. The monolithic idea of the monument as a commemorative presentation, and in this case the people

of Chile, negates the notion of an archive. An archive brings me near to the mutable, diverse and simultaneous reality of the inhabitants of this disintegrated territory. I don't pretend to generalize, my aim is to recognize and find those things that exist outside of any monumentalization of history, media, political discourses or social sciences.

CM: I am interested in the "use" that this piece makes of art as an intermediary between the social and personal realms. Should art have a specific "use"? Is art, in this case, a legitimizing agent of personal experiences?

MS: Instead of speaking of use, I think art should have a function, or even better, many functions that contribute to consciousness and the symbolic restitution of the unconscious needs of a community. With my work, I don't pretend to legitimize personal experiences but only to mediate, enabling them to have that place they should have always had.

CM: In previous projects, "Vitrinas" ("Windows") in 1996 and "El Cuerpo del Lugar" ("The Body of Place") in 1997 you had already requested the public's participation through the use of text. In those cases the text was examining something different: in "Vitrinas" an association or a word of the language was evoked and in "El Cuerpo del Lugar", a place in the city. With the public's responses you created a sort of dictionary of places, its meanings evoking the idea of a place or a word as shelters or vessels in which the weight of human experience rests. Could you speak about this metaphoric use of language in your work?

MS: In fact, I have a fixation with words which is manifested through my collection of dictionaries of all types, what doesn't mean that I am concerned with a metaphoric use of language, but instead, with a form of knowledge with which to approach reality. In regard to "Vitrinas" and "El cuerpo del Lugar", I treated words from a more affective and personal dimension than these may actually have. Again, I was concerned not with the general meanings of the word, but with those things that the words in a dictionary don't mention, such as the word tied to an experience, a series of emotions and a personal history.

CM: Do you write?

MS: If you are referring to writing assumed as an occupation, no.

CM: Your work presents the need of rescuing the identity of individuals and taking them out of the anonymity in which they have been submerged by historical events or simply by ordinary experiences. Years after the fall of the dictatorship in Chile, do you see a change in the relationship of new generations with the history of that country? Are Chileans responsible for their past?

MS: If there is a consciousness that was awoken by the work in regard to history this was not motivated by the dictatorship. There is a construction of individual

memories that converged in the form of an archive. As I mentioned earlier, both dictatorship and post-dictatorship happened to be scenarios for the development of a project that could have also been done in another country.

I don't feel I have the authority to tell you if Chileans are or not responsible for their past, when they have been for so many years subjected to the politics of oblivion. But I do recognize this is a post-dictatorship problem. For the youngest generations the times of the dictatorship are as distant as the Pacific War.

CM: "Archivo: Documento Biográfico de Los Habitantes de Chile" had an incredible response of more than three thousand letters, and was also declared a national patrimony. Do you think this project has had an effect on the Chilean people? Is this project accessible to the people? What is the future of this document?

MS: The work is not national patrimony but documentary patrimony, which is something very different. This awoke the interest of the Direction of Libraries and Museums because of its documentary, educational and artistic value. As a consequence they facilitate its dissemination through the library net for the whole country.

I have the idea of extending the experience of "Documento Biográfico" to South America. In that case the destiny of the present archive would be to be part of a much larger one.

In regard to the effects "in Chile", it would be impossible for me to calculate the effects and extremely pretentious from my part to think that it has had an effect on the people, that is something too abstract. I am only interested in the hundreds of possibilities of encounters that may have happened between anonymous people, by reading the life of others like or unlike them in the letters. Unifying similar or different personal situations through the intimate act of writing or reading a letter. The truth is that "Documento Biográfico" has a life of its own.

CM: What are you working on nowadays?

MS: At the moment I am working on the project "Conductas Colectivas de los Habitantes de Chile" ("Collective Behaviours of the Inhabitants of Chile"). It consists in the creation of audio-visual recordings that document religious, athletic, political or festive events, in which individuals stop acting as such and give themselves as part of a social body. I am interested in investigating how people get to identify collectively from the union of their actions, passions, beliefs and customs. This project departed from the development of "Documento Biográfico", being simultaneously the other side of the same coin.

Carlos Motta is an artist living in New York.

*For more information about Mariana Silva visit
www.marianasilva.cl*