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LOTTY ROSENFELD. FOR A POETICS OF REBELLION

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, crushed the Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende. The objective was to replace a progressive, democratically elected government by a brutal military dictatorship. The was supported by the CIA. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger played a direct role in the military plot.ⁱ

Good art is about the reality within which the author lives, and, if it is well done, the reader lives it with the author.ⁱⁱ

During the military dictatorship, a Chilean artist took the street to lay crosses on the pavement. She thus inaugurated a complex mission to subvert signs.ⁱⁱⁱ

These three quotes supply the necessary directions to approach the work by Chilean artist Lotty Rosenfeld. The first sets up the context where her art developed when she was in her thirties.^{iv} The second reveals where her gaze lay, as well as the reality she survived then and the one she breathes today. The third indicates her conceptual framework, decoded by insubordination, and the resistance to all signs imposed upon her.^v

By the end of the 1970s, Chile was not the only Latin American country under military dictatorship. Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia were also governed by a military regime, each with its own particularities.^{vi} This brutal background provided Rosenfeld with plenty of materials to make an art that transcended the bounds of her repressive reality. Addressing the complexity of her country's daily life without reproducing it,

Rosenfeld's art carries the viewers into her nonconformity with all situations that violate human rights, regardless of whether they are dictated by callous generals or determined by the indistinguishable maneuvers of a market economy. Awareness and courage attached to a solid artistic foundation and aesthetic values, her art guides the viewer through the labyrinths of repression, torture, and the destitution of everyday life

around the current globalized world. What makes Rosenfeld's art so steadily stand out for more than 30 decades is her way of articulating all these apparently dissimilar realities: she doesn't do it explicitly, *à la thèse*. Unlike many artists whose work is labeled "political" or who follow the rules of "anti-art" (art that refuses to take pleasure in its formal properties), she proceeds in a way that is visual, rigorous, and free of ornament. Like the wind over a sandy beach, Rosenfeld's work sweeps the audience out of their comfort zone. Here lies the transformative power of her art.

This brings to mind Herbert Marcuse, who was disregarded for few decades while the art world devoted itself to the cult of postmodernism. Marcuse's ideas on art, as expressed in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, are currently receiving renewed attention. With regard to political art, the author argues that art is not to be courteously absorbed; its purpose is rather to challenge and disrupt prevailing norms. He vigorously rejects the notion that art can successfully address the degeneration of society by simply recreating and reproducing this degeneration. The "one-dimensionality" of society cannot be exposed and/or attacked by mirroring it. It is too familiar, and the intention will ultimately be thwarted if the art world reproduces the experience of daily life.^{vii}

Lotty Rosenfeld's representations of her reality encompass Marcuse's concept of the aesthetic dimension: her art contains the two major necessary conditions for avoiding the one-dimensionality of political art. First, she supplies her home society as well as those further afield with the necessary political and artistic tools to understand their hidden conflicts and contradictions. Second, her work embodies courage.

Although a fair amount has been written about conceptual, video, and performance art made by female artists in Europe and the United States, Latin America is still a relatively unknown territory, even if recent years have seen the publication of catalogue essays that attempt to reconstruct that history. Latin American artists such as Rosenfeld, Anna Bella Geiger and Leticia Parente (Brazil), and Margarita Paska (Argentina), among others, focused their work on political and personal themes as well as on their identity as women and artists from countries on the periphery of the dominant artistic centers. Performance, media-based art, photography and installations in public and private spaces are nowadays assimilated by the art world. In the 70s, however, when Rosenfeld began her artistic career, these media were developing outside of the understanding of the critical mainstream. Like many whose career started in the 70s, Rosenfeld was influenced by Conceptual Art, Fluxus and its actions, and the legacy of Dadaism. She became an active member of CADA, an

interdisciplinary group of Chilean artists and writers (Diamela Eltit, Raúl Zurita, Juan Castillo, and Fernando Balcells) engaged in critical reflection and activism around Art and Politics – an urgent dilemma, especially given the dictatorial status of Chile in 1980s. Thus, CADA concentrated on unleashing urban interventions so as to set up a new aesthetic proposal that would restructure the artistic circuits existing under the dictatorship. The group appealed for increased engagement in the media, and rapidly became mainstays of art discourse.^{viii}

Working outside the art market, Rosenfeld's performances, videos and video installations are conceptual creations echoing her approach to coping with an authoritarian regime. Both then and now, they served as weapons as well as devices for scrutinizing the world, so as to understand the subtle connections between the apparent stability of our daily routine and the complex subtexts that keep the modern state (surprisingly) afloat. Rosenfeld's art reflects on the possibilities and challenges of visually representing political repression, displacement, globalization, and exclusion.

Such a radical stance has made Rosenfeld a catalyst in the contemporary history of political art. Crossing the limits of her hinterlands, her trajectory has made her a prominent figure among those artists who have challenged colleagues living in repressive regimes to explore their identities, experiences, and political/artistic commitments.

Equipped with this deep-seated reputation and a long list of prizes, commissions and exhibitions around the world, Rosenfeld will arrive in Spain in March 2013 for her first individual exhibition in this country. *Por una poética de la rebeldía* includes works produced from 1979 to 2009, plus a new version of *A Mile of Crosses on the Road*. For this classic art-action piece, once more she will lay white lines on the asphalt in such a way as to inscribe a row of cruciforms along the extension of Av. Américo Vespucio in front of the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo. As in previous versions, the artist inserts on the median strip of the road (a subversion of the sign, as the cultural theorist Nelly Richards says) large white lines which mimic the road markings and thus interfere with the traffic rules. Against the grammar of political and social order, *A Mile of Crosses on the Road* has become her signature piece, and has been created repeatedly since its first enactment in Chile (1979). From Colombia to Kassel during Documenta 12, and on different occasions in front of symbolic sites such as the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, or the White House in Washington, D.C., the piece's subversive force has not diminished – even so many years after the first intervention during the Pinochet era in a space controlled by a repressive regime. Then, she used

lengths of white cloth on a main road in Santiago de Chile. Today she uses thick white masking tape, but the intention is the same: not only to manipulate a road marking, but also to interrupt everyday routine in order to take over the public realm. At the exhibition, there will be three videos documenting this nomadic piece in Kassel, New York, and Cali, as well as the new version on the Avenida Américo Vesputio.

If in the 70s the idea was to voice the despair of her country, now this act of insubordination continues to be a mute, subversive act against different types of dictatorship still in power in today's world, both political and social. Insurgent projects appear through out of the exhibition: *Moción de Orden* (2002) is a video consisting of a series of visual and textual fragments, choppy, overlapping, stressed, handled as a consistent exercise of memory reorganization; stock images, which go beyond the journalistic or historical significance of events, presented as a critical assessment of the present through a fascinating montage. The video-installations of *Moción de Orden* select and manipulate informative materials that travel through the networks of global communication and global media services. According to the Chilean theorist Nelly Richards, who has written extensively about Rosenfeld, *Moción de Orden* "subjects these familiar images (already seen and archived by mass audiences) to a shock treatment that shatters them into multi-semantic and multi-ideological intersections (crosses). The work mixes images of Fujimori looking at Nestor Zerpa ("his rival during the crisis"), snipers in Bosnia, Commander Chávez crossing out lists, George Bush vacationing after the attack on the World Trade Center towers, Chilean political prisoners, Muhammad Ali in front of an accusing committee, and the recent looting in Argentina, among other events of our contemporaneity. All of these are simultaneously mixed with images of the first Chilean silent film, *El Húsar de la muerte*, and with a fragment of Joyce's *Ulysses*." Rosenfeld's works attempt to destabilize concepts that we take for granted. It offers alternative views of the past and present which challenge the public imagery defined by mass-media news; in doing so she offers altered ways of seeing, and hence understanding, crucial current events.

Moción de Orden offers powerful images of today's world which emphasize vision over text and dialogue. Insisting on the relative autonomy of the culture, and exploring art's specific interstices within political and economic structures, this and other media-based works (such as *Paz para Sebastián Acevedo*, 1985, *Cautivos*, 1989, *El Empeño Latinoamericano*, 1989) involve a shift in emphasis from culture itself to the domain of cultural politics – a place where meanings are negotiated and relationships of dominance and subordination are defined and contested. For example, the video installation *Cautivos* made at the finale of the dictatorship, displays images of one of

the military projects that were never finished, a hospital on the outskirts of the city of Santiago, combined with television images of a trial of Cuban dissidents and others of Mathias Rust, the German aviator known for his illegal landing near Moscow's Red Square on May 28, 1987. The combined elements lose their own identity, to represent the tension of the ideological crisis and the failure of the system. This conceptually intricate distortion of media images is an act of activism.

As Stuart Hall has said, cultural practices then become a realm where one engages with and elaborates politics.^{ix} Politics in this context has nothing to do with political parties, but with how individuals can express their identity and how artists can define their own place in the world. In a period during which movements of people, ideas, and technology have come under growing and intensified scrutiny, it seems particularly important to reflect on the possibilities and challenges for understanding the fragility of the industrialized world's power, despite its apparent freedom and abundance. The new local/global system has swiftly and relentlessly accelerated the process of cultural circulation and exchange. While these traits have existed for centuries, as Irit Rogoff suggests in her book *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*: "We simply lacked the awareness of this process and the means to narrate it." ^xAs a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events, history has little value today. Monolithic views, driven by single ideas and motives, don't constitute understanding in the present. We need to incorporate it into the future and the past as well.

Por una poética de la rebeldía encompasses twenty years of rigorous artistic practice, exploring the ways that art and political views represented by nomadic straight lines, as well as by videos relating history and performance, or the eloquent collage of mass media images, can create contexts where art and politics come together outside of the conventional canon. Lotty Rosenfeld's body of work is verbally sharp and pictorially courageous. And ultimately timeless.

Text about exhibition *Lotty Rosenfeld. For a Poetics of Rebellion* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, March 8 –July 21 2013)

ⁱ <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/CHO309A.html>.

ⁱⁱ Eva Hauser, "The Velvet Revolution and the Iron Necessity," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society and Social Responsibility*, ed. Carol Becker (Routledge: New York, London, 1994), 93.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nelly Richards, "City, Art and Politics." Unpublished.

^{iv} Born on June 20, 1943 in Santiago de Chile, from 1964 to 1968 she studied at the School of Applied Arts at the University of Chile, rapidly displaying great skill at engraving. In 1978 she won first prize in engraving at the National Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago. She was close to the literary group Generación del 70, and also

joined the Escena de Avanzada, a conceptual tendency committed to taking a stand, by means of new visual languages, against the institutional values imposed by the government of the day.

^v Nelly Richards, *ibid.*

^{vi} In 1954, General Alfredo Stroessner took control of Paraguay. The Brazilian military overthrew the democratic and popular government of João Goulart in 1964. Through a series of coups General Hugo Banzer took power in Bolivia in 1971. On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet bombed the presidential palace of La Moneda, overthrowing the democratically elected president Salvador Allende in Chile. Only three years later, on March 24, 1976, a military junta headed by General Jorge Rafael Videla seized power in Argentina.

^{vii} Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1978), 14-40. Also see Carol Becker, "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art," in Becker, ed., *The Subversive Imagination*, 114-129.

^{viii} CADA's project is to promote collective approaches in the development of a necessarily social and participative art. For example, the action entitled *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* (How not to Starve to Death in Art, 1979) consisted partly in handing out 100 liters of milk to 100 needy families in the deprived community of La Granja on the capital's periphery. Each milk bag bore a text that functioned as an element of equivalence between the people receiving the milk for consumption, and the art product that used the packing as a support and a vehicle of information. This work ranged from video registration to political analysis in magazines, and from the segregated bodies of the destitute in the city to finally reaching both the milk industry and a larger audience: milk-distributing trucks parked in front of the National Museum of Fine Arts indicated, for a few hours, that Chilean Art was in crisis. "Those were difficult years in Chile, due to the conditions imposed by the dictatorship. Through the construction of a new artistic experience, we were profoundly questioning the history of art and the nature of artistic practices in this country," the artist has said.

^{ix} Cited by Nicholas Mirzoeff. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (Routledge, London, 1999), 24

^x Irit Rogoff. (Routledge London, 2000)