

Dislocación: The Exhibition as an Analytical Procedure

Justo Pastor Mellado

The title of the project *Dislocación* stems from a traumatic consideration produced by a methodological displacement in the discourse of curatorship. In my work as an independent curator in vulnerable areas of the artistic institutional system, I have been able to propose a distinction between “service curatorship” and “curatorship as production of infrastructure.”

The first refers to the curator as an agent of services for the new emerging labor categories of global cities, while the second is directly linked to the production of raw materials for the work of history. This means that an exhibition involves the undertaking of historiographic production that is not suited to academic channels. I will not go into the reasons for this in the present document. I will just state the existence of a dislocation between artistic practice and the historicizing of practices.

When I visited the Kunstmuseum in Bern, curated by Kathleen Bühler, I suddenly found myself face-to-face with a version of *The Woodcutter* by Ferdinand Hodler, otherwise known as the “national painter” of Switzerland (ill. p. ##). In this work of 1910, Hodler appears to continue the tradition of Jean-François Millet, representing a rural scene in a beautifully dignified manner. The low position of the horizon magnifies the form of the figure standing against a clear background that outlines the violent energy of a figure that appears to contain all the energy of the character. The force of the composition defines the field of the signs; the woodcutter is a metonymic agent of the tree. But these are trees with no branches or leaves that do not provide any shade at all. The grey sky is blanketed by low clouds that shape a melancholic background indicative of the unease of the location. The burly arms hold the axe

with such force that they appear to be imagining in anticipation the sound of the trunk splitting as the sharp weight falls and cuts, formulating a hypothesis on the decapitation of an image of the social structure that excludes him as a pioneer in his own land.

The raised feet of the woodcutter appear to defy the force of gravity, concentrating attention again on the axe as an extension of the desire to slice through the vegetable fiber in its very base. The tip of the axe is suspended in the top right-hand corner of the canvas, while the lower left reveals the precise initial cuts that will fell the tree. This is, incidentally, the only diagonal structure, while the two trees framing the effort of the woodcutter exhibit rectitude and parallelism as graphic synonyms that provide all possible order to the composition. The woodcutter himself is the displaced repetition of the diagonal that must be straightened out with the danger of emigration.

One thing must be borne in mind: the folds of the trousers and shirt are a visual metonym for the veins and musculature of the body. The feet are solidly placed sustaining the dynamic stance of legs that introduce a curved element providing stability to the representation of strength. The fragility will be imbued in the bare surface of the tree trunks—a factor of evident rationality. Only the trees that do not follow the line will be uprooted. The trees can be understood as Jungian metaphors for social personality. Dislocation is located here in the composite base itself: the reproduction of the cutting gesture is the basis of political representation.

When I visited the Kunstmuseum in Bern my interest was sustained by my memory of a visit to the Hodler exhibition in Chile, in the early nineties, at the Museo de Bellas Artes of Santiago de Chile—one of the first international exhibitions held early in the democratic transition. The fact that the Swiss Hodler collectors belong to the class of investors who operate in the field of cement production must be viewed in a paradigmatic perspective throughout this process; for they are linked to the capacity for building the current

experiments in accelerated urban renovation that have helped dissolve the concept of citizenship.

History is a fiction that builds and is built on the basis of unequal representations. Exactly at the time when Hodler was completing his painting, Swiss colonists were erecting the biggest sawmill in southern South America, on the island of Tierra del Fuego. This fact highlights the severing of family relationships based on the privileges of the primogenitors, favoring the organized displacement of dozens of Swiss families to the southern territories of Chile, from 1876 onward.

In December 2009, when Ingrid Wildi Merino was working to raise resources and campaign for funding for *Dislocación* in Santiago, presentation ceremonies were underway in the Magallanes Region for the bicentenary project of the Alberto Baeriswyl Pittet Local Museum in Puerto Yatou, Tierra del Fuego. The local press made great mention of the need to strengthen the links between Switzerland and Chile within the framework of the bicentenary in order to recover the historical memory that has linked the two communities since the first Swiss immigration to Chilean territory. This project consisted of the restoration of the administrative building of the Puerto Yatou timber company—founded in 1908 by the son of Swiss immigrants Alberto Baeriswyl Pittet—and its transformation into a local museum that aimed to recover the important remains of the work undertaken by colonists and their descendants during the “Golden Age of Magallanes.”

Concurrently, *Dislocación* had to earn its legitimacy as a project within a Swiss cultural institutional system that has shown itself fearless of both historical elaboration and the role of contemporary art practices as vectors of critical reflection on its own history. Thus, this project was able to use works by contemporary Swiss artists that work to erase attempts toward exalted sublime recuperation of migration (ill. p. ##).

Many of those in the first wave of Swiss migration to Chile could not withstand the

inclemency of the weather and the hard working conditions, and they returned to their place of origin. This return was a form of double defeat, where their initial departure had been the first. The extreme south, the end of the world, is a good place to undertake the European colonial project in the boundaries, where pillaging prevails as the general form of settlement. What appears masterly and structurally exact from the point of view of recovering histories of transference is that the correspondence between Hodler's painting and the timber industry established through the hands of Swiss colonists anticipates the curious correspondence between production of the *Dislocación* exhibition and the support given to restoring the remains of the logging enclave by the Swiss authorities in Chile. This situation will come to define the political dislocation that was implicit in defending and sustaining the *Dislocación* project itself in Chile, because, in the opinion of the local Swiss officials, this was an exhibition that did not completely represent the Swiss legacy in Chile. In other words, strictly speaking, what was appropriate was the reproduction of an already outdated colonial representation that could be worked on—with all institutional legitimacy—in the manner of a ruin. The contemporary nature of *Dislocación* dismantled the idea of the exaltation of migrations, against the backdrop of a Europe marked by great political discomfort on this issue.

As part of the Chilean republic bicentenary celebrations, a project such as *Dislocación* stresses the contradictions of the commemoration itself. But *Dislocación* also confirms the dismantling of representations that commonly intend to whitewash migratory dramas. In other words, all migration is a drama that includes the construction of a departure and the construction of an arrival that presuppose the confrontation of hostile conditions that reproduce the symbolic model of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The cruelty of this analysis leads us to formulate the question on “the Trojan War” that some Swiss colonists have lost and that has forced them to undertake the voyage, from a situation of maximum territorial compression to

a one of maximum expansion.

Connecting Ferdinand Hodler's *The Woodcutter* with the business of Swiss colonization to which I refer implies the suggestion that the "absence of forest" within the confines of the painting is recompensed by the exploitation of the "excess of forest" in a distant territory. This puts the accent on a form of geopolitics that is aware of migrations. It prevents us from working on the basis of recovering the entities that constitute identity. Chile seeks to define its identity as a concentrated country; Switzerland seeks to define its identity by appealing to territorial expansion. It has always been a location for the concentration of capital; the nation has rarely been forced to make any corporeal commitment beyond its frontiers, at least since the times when the Swiss Guard worked in the service of European courts. Thus, it is important to place the body of artists in relation to the memory of the body of colonists, passing by the symbolic endorsement of Hodler that damaged the root of its own representation in the year when the Republic of Chile was celebrating its first Centenary. At the time—1910—the Swiss colonists had already been on the southern coasts for thirty years. This situation helped form the bases of the small epistemologies that operate in the triumphant celebration of migratory histories. The epistemology I refer to is corporeally and geographically placed; not to say, overdetermined. It appears as though the reactionary ideology that celebrates colonialism as a value that conceals an expansion policy converted into a monument to violence and migratory displacements gets reproduced. Symbolically the white man with blue eyes represents his as the only form of knowledge that is able to achieve universality. Switzerland must export the universality already achieved that nonetheless contains within its bosom the seed of its dissolution. The painting of *The Woodcutter* is verified as an expression of the pure singularity indicated by the object of exclusion: the crooked tree. But there is no forest in the painting: only the expression of the desire for industry. Hodler himself paints residual images and aims to retain within the space of the

painting what has already been expelled from his social field. This validates the idea that industry works inwards, while the forest works outwards, increasing control over time on the one hand and on the other exploiting the uncontrolled nature of the forests of a distant territory. This signifies reproducing the knowledge of the time in exploitation of the overflowing territory. Expansion that is built on the extermination of the Other and that is subject to fulfillment of the statement “I colonize; therefore, I am,” on the basis of two technologies: plundering and transfer. The sawmill stands on the shore of the Magellan Strait, a sea route destined to shorten trade links.

One hundred years on from the above events, an exhibition such as *Dislocación* can be seen as formulating a hypothesis to aid understanding of how an exhibition of Hodler at the beginning of the return to democracy could be an expression of the eurocentric nature of power. Meanwhile, two decades later, *Dislocación* builds a forum for research on the structural dislocations arising within the production of knowledge in the ceremonial context of the Bicentenary, that ends up being the best possible occasion to consider the conceptual impositions of the ideological myths of Independence as a process of the invention of the Nation.

Artistic practices, in this situation, show how decolonization is a eurocentric myth. The only option possible is the development of a frontier perspective of thought where colonialism, analytical colonialism, and postcolonialism establish exchanges that allow us to raise the current fiction of a campaign of correspondences between the identity of the State and the identity of populations. Because in Chile, it is not possible to state that there is any antimodern nationalism. On the contrary, what could have been built is an incomplete modern nationality that will bend over backwards to meet the ranking demanded by IMF policies. But this presupposes the continuity of a neoliberal model the fine tuning of which occurred during the post-dictatorship period! *Dislocación*, in this context, aims to demonstrate that the

indicated task itself is incomplete and symbolically cannot be fulfilled.

Dislocación is more than an exhibition; a scheme of work and travel schedule that places the artists under pressure on two fronts: migration and transference. The first alludes to the body while the second, coming from the bodies, takes into consideration the conditions of transfer. But in strict terms, I will use them as synonyms, as words that allude to superimposed social situations. Thus, *Dislocación* creates its own possibility of institutional intervention as a critical platform, restituting the interpellative position of artistic practices at a time when the Chilean intellectual scene is witnessing a deep seated waning of the human sciences.

The question formulated by *Dislocación* asks whether it is possible to raise a subordinate epistemology. This means consideration of the possibility of the existence of a decolonized, transmodern world raised on the script of the neo-developmental program, the objective of which would be to mount a transmodern recolonization. Such a perspective would be impossible, as neo-developmentalism—if I decide to so name this specific type of global ensemble—would become a foreseeable outcome that would result in the raising of new structures destined to dilute experiences of possible resistance, incorporating them to its exercise of analytical correction, rendering all “alternatives” unviable in practice, if not conceptually reparatory.

However, *Dislocación* instills a degree of doubt about the effectiveness of postcolonial analysis in the debates of a specific intellectual moment in time. It remains to be seen how this doubt infringes on the Swiss analytical space in the field of art history and the areas with which it shares a frontier. We already know this. We have read it. We have repeated and cited it in essays of “correct political incorrectness.” Postcolonialism is a space to think and rethink the logic that sustains the mechanisms and maps of power. On this front, we must be satisfied with the social science we already have and that we have been able to sustain as a result of the contributions of the Ford Foundation, this being a metaphor that models the recolonial nature

of social theory. (The work of Thomas Hirschhorn in this exhibition is worthy of mention here as a Ford Ranger double cab vehicle was instrumental in its production, ill. p. ##.)

Speaking of historical and narrative comings and goings, seeking in the past and the present the accelerated traditions of our shared experience of life, means undertaking the program of any expanding university discipline that must take this on board and approach the higher education marked following a declared paradigmatic crisis. Postcolonialism will be the expression of this fracture in the sense that it will operate as reconstructive criticism of the Western imperialist subject and the account of progress carried within it. We do not have to succumb to the ingenuous idea that curriculum conquests of the postcolonial accounts are synonymous with any type of organized resistance. Such a rupture does not exist; no rupture is possible, rather academic transferences are made possible through the survival strategies of vulnerable university units within the bosom of an open university system. Thus, postcolonial thought ends up as a ghetto that successfully installs its own publishing project; that is, it survives as a publishing fiction.

We already know: power is imperfect and cannot exterminate the subjectivities that resist it; it recovers them, absorbs them, incorporates them, redevelops them, and returns them to circulation through aided distribution programs. Yes it does! We have already learned that the postcolonial subject is hybrid, displaced, and deterritorialized; in other words, the defining element of the recolonial nature of the power of the state is to make areas of hybridization, displacement, and de-territorialization operational as a strategy for redefining the limits of citizenship.

Recovering the memory of the Swiss colonists in Tierra del Fuego satisfies current strategies for the inclusion of historical narratives within national heritage as domination through symbolic inversion. Administrative officials on cultural projects have evidently been overpowered by the planned works of the guest artists in *Dislocación*. These works are, in

strict terms, the proceedings of research that destabilizes the knowledge base of the colonizer subject. But they also project this, displacing it from historical reproduction, exercising criticism of Swiss expansion itself as a cultural support.

The phallic emblem implicit in *The Woodcutter* has been substituted by the constitution of dissonant voices of women, minorities, the marginalized, subordinates; in other words, the vulnerable subjectivity that forms the objective of public policies in culture. We have therefore become professionals in reasonable subordination. Our aim is to erect structures of access, inclusion, of marginalized sectors. But this was already invented by the social sciences in our country in the mid-sixties! Today we promote the recognition of intermediary spaces, where we know that cultural differences are articulated as unstable and poorly adapted fragments that have an impact on the amount of accumulated strength available to negotiate openings for action and for flexible recognition of singularized demands that can be systematically integrated.

It is clearly evident that minority narratives express their differences in relation to the dominant culture in such a way that it is in relation to this culture that a minority point of view can imagine another type of community and forge the subjective tools of possible resistance. Thus, *Dislocación* has been considered a subordinate form of productivity. The constituent works of *Dislocación* translate hybrid programs that contaminate class analysis and displace problems linked to reduction through transfer, enabling artistic practices as productions from the frontier, destined to operate in the local imagery of cities such as Bern and Santiago de Chile, not to mention Ciudad Juárez (on the northern frontier of Mexico) and Arica (on the northern frontier of Chile).

To a greater or lesser extent, the frontier is a metaphor where architectural, spatial, and economic marginalization materializes and affects the representations of corporeality themselves. But it is also the unstable place where forms of liberating mobility arise, drawing

together the intensities of transnationalized subjectivities.