

Voluspa Jarpa

La biblioteca de la no-historia de Chile

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Voluspa Jarpa's work has long concerned itself with the violence latent in every form of official representation. Since 1995 she has, for instance, produced several different works, including paintings that feature vacant lots “a step away from garbage dumps”—as opposed to postcard city landscapes, Chilean traditional paintings from the natural countryside, and monuments. She later produced major works concerning the tension between history, as official narrative, and hysteria, as inexpressible experience that translates not into words but into somatic symptoms. Among these works are enormous irregular volumes—swarms—of very small figures of Charcot's¹ hysterical women patients with cutouts of their photographs on transparent mica, overflowing into symmetrical architectural spaces—into large art galleries, certainly, but also into monumental public buildings, libraries among them. Discomfiture in the public space; interference with habits of perception; an edgy sense that smooth surfaces (or versions) appear only after a complex process of suppression of what is unsightly; the looming threat of the formless . . . the works created for *Dislocación* share these traits. Materially, however, they are something else. She has made 608 signed and numbered books (not “artist's books,” but quite the contrary) and displayed them differently in three bookstores in three sections of the city. Up to five can be removed from each location daily by members of the public, on one condition: that they fill in a form indicating the space in which they are to be placed. The exhibition finishes when the last book is given away. In

¹ French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), teacher of Sigmund Freud.

one, the books are displayed on shelves accessible to the public, lit from behind, and their darkness stands out against the white light. In another, pocket-sized books are placed in a stall for publications on sale, with advertising material; in yet another, there is only one transparent book, within a lightbox, in the store window.

What is actually in the books? Archival material. It is difficult to read: sometimes faded, at others smudged, but always, always obliterated in large part by the dark lines associated with censorship. The documents come from “intelligence” files—from U.S. government files on Chile during the period following Salvador Allende's election and well into the mandate of the country's first freely elected president after the military coup in 1973. They were declassified in 1999, but not before being screened to find and eliminate any disclosures that might affect the U.S. or its collaborators. They distort and hide as much or more than they actually show. In these works by Voluspa Jarpa, the information contained in the documents is not finally, what counts, despite provoking—and generally frustrating—an interest that is almost prurient. The work is thought-provoking inasmuch as it presents the bewildering physical, material traces of information that destroys itself; the artist presents it as an image of the impossibility of its own transmission. The books are at the same time readable and unreadable.

Pandora's box, says one of the documents: opening up the Pinochet files is like opening Pandora's box—it should unsettle history. History is written by selecting what is to become part of a story. History is befuddled by the excess of information; history, like the human beings who write it, “can only bear so much reality.” History is created through repression of some of the unmanageable facts, of some of the unmanageable feelings and experiences, some of the unbearable contradictions; history is always a version. And archival material has the power to unsettle it . . . or does it? Has this material really unsettled Chilean history as it is now told, as it is now written? Have these heavily censored pages left a mark on history?

Apparently not, or maybe not yet. Archival material is undoubtedly from the past; yet it is also the enigmatic keeper of future versions, of future interpretations. Unless, of course, the material is suppressed, obliterated, deleted—or simply forgotten, because it is unbearable, or because there is at present no acceptable way of reading it.

How does an artist, not a historian, go about tackling problems like these? Not by directly addressing the issues implied in whatever maimed texts are presented. Rather, Voluspa Jarpa has created a symbolic form of circulation for the archival material. She has also created forms of display that turn the texts into images of their own denial and obliteration. She makes visible a material that puts visibility itself into question, and sets the scene for a paradoxical and complex image.

Images are neither true nor false; of themselves, they cannot lie (montage, captions, and contexts do that for them). And something in them always resists translations into words.²

The artist has taken words as her material: verbose censored texts, which reveal and conceal at the same time. By turning them into an image, she places them in the wobbly territory between fact and fiction, and creates a strangeness which appeals to a history as yet unwritten. And which may remain unwritten for a long time, maybe forever. *La biblioteca de la no-historia de Chile* is a challenging work, and it reaches beyond the realm of self-absorbed art.

² See Carlo Ginzburg, *Un seul témoin* (Paris, 2007), pp.102–03.