

From Mike Leggett

To Paulina Varas, (Curator, Cecilia Vicuña exhibition)

In response to the questions you ask:

1-What is your memory of the Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile, I mean of the whole experience at the Royal College of Art in London in October 1974?

I remember the opening with a crowd of some 80 – 100 people, and the speeches; the big banner by John Dugger; but not of the other individual pieces, though I remember the gallery space was filled with artworks. I didn't live in London so was only present for the opening event – art and politics in Britain at that time was very vigorous and active, and spreading away from the city of London, so after 40 years the memory of so many events and activities become difficult to separate.

2-Please describe your participation, as artist or co-organizer, or both.

I think it was Cecilia who suggested I make a video; I had met her during one of her visits to the Beau Geste Press in the west of England, near to where I lived at the time. I was teaching film part-time at the college of art in Exeter and we had a portable video recorder and camera kit, one of the first to become available in a British art school. I took the gear to the first anniversary of the military coup in Trafalgar Square, London and got into a good position to record the events. (Thankfully my girlfriend came too as it was pouring with rain and she held an umbrella!)

Towards the end of the event I noticed a friend of mine, John 'Hoppy' Hopkins, down in the crowd also with a Portapak. A media activist of many years, he had a studio, Fantasy Factory, just around the corner, and enthusiastically agreed to share the video material he had shot for the AFD project.

I shot the interview with Juan Rada before meeting at the Factory to edit the video with Hoppy. Editing technology for analogue video was quite crude in those days which accounts for the variable quality of the tape today. But we both associated with artists and community co-operative workshops (film and video), the essential objective being that we made and distributed work independently of the dominant media channels.

The finished tape was shown on a monitor screen at the RCA, - there were no video projectors at that time – and subsequently was distributed to student and trade union groups.

3-What meaning do you to attribute to this event, both then, in the context of the cultural response in Europe to the military coup in Chile on September 11, 1973, and now, 40 years on?

AFD was a significant event as it was a rallying point for artists like myself who went further than simply making art politically through co-operative and collective practice. I felt there was room in professional practice to pursue personal objectives in making art but also to lend my technical skills and aesthetic sense to the needs of communities both social and political. My personal practice centred on 16mm 'abstract' film and video at the time. I remember I was attending the Second International Avant-Garde Festival at the National Film Theatre in London on the day news of the coup reached England, on the Wednesday morning 12th September 1973. Small groups were gathering to discuss the terrible news, who stood apart from the rest of the artists and audiences who were still

preparing for the final days of the festival. I got into a big argument with the festival director who insisted that to suggest the Americans were involved in the military coup was just pure paranoia, dismissing it is simply being fashionable to be so anti-American!

Some weeks later, back at the art college where I taught, a colleague saw I was wearing a Solidarity with Chile badge. He became very emotional saying that communists must be opposed and that I was being duped. Though I explained Allende had come to power through popular franchise and had instituted reforms not unlike the British Labour government of the late-1940s, he was inconsolable. Ironically as a Polish survivor of a Nazi concentration camp and refugee to Britain he had enjoyed the Labour reforms, attending art school in London and subsequently establishing a reputation as a printmaker and poet. The conservative press in Britain during the 1970s had continued to play up the rhetoric of the Cold War in describing the Allende government, and as far as my colleague was concerned and as a devout Catholic, it was the Russians who had brought such disaster and misery to his country and therefore no communists could be trusted.

Many artists in England during this time were determined to remain apart from direct political action, either within the work, or through the contexts in which it was seen. Administrations with government departments and art schools had been challenged in the late-1960s by students and some lecturers intent on bringing government financial support for, and teaching of the arts, into the modern era. This was characterised by interdisciplinary ways of working, intermedia approaches, time-based media and performance, cooperative sharing of resources and ideas, and breaking away from object-based, outcomes for connoisseur and gallerists. Whilst the shifts in ways of working were being recognised and reforms put in place, the administrators, for their jobs and because of who they were, were uneasy as to where the processes of change and renewal would end and resisted increasingly a general move towards progressive forms of art, in production and in distribution. So the response from many artists was to go back into their studios and not say anything to upset those who controlled the purse-strings.

However, many continued to be inspired and encouraged by the bravery of initially the Vietnamese people and then the Chilean people in their struggle, continuing to lend support. For instance a booklet, 'An Introduction to Chile – a cartoon history', was published in 1975 by a group of writers, and an illustrator previously associated with the Beau Geste Press. Progressive films from Latin America became more widely seen such as 'La hora de los hornos' (1968) by the Argentinians Solanas and Getino; Patrizio Guzman's film, 'The Battle of Chile'; and the films of Brazilian, Glauba Rocha and Cinema Novo.

Those working with film and video and other media activists continued to develop stronger ties with one another and explore other sources of project funding, such as being very involved in setting up Britain's fourth television station, Channel Four. But its opening coincided with Margaret Thatcher leading a new right wing government into power, (a friend of Pinochet), and an ideologue who knew well the need to curtail the ambitions of the new broadcasters.

To the present day and forty years later and we continue to be confronted with the political oppression of the poor in resource-rich countries, in particular those of the African continent. The rich countries have sewn up trade in a series of exclusive agreements and in their greed have corralled world liquidity through a series of mis-managed capitalist adventures. Now, as industrialisation steps up to new and more frantic levels, we are confronted with the ultimate arbiter of existence, the collapse of the biosphere and the

battle for land and water.

Artists no longer work progressively within countries, but within the whole world; the era of the internet presents a tool for good but also one which continues to aid the plunderers of the planet. From 1973 until today, Artists for Democracy now must work to ensure that all artists and their audiences reflect upon the fact that our political sphere is now a global one, a multicultural arena in which the future of humankind will be played out. We don't have long to get it right.

Mike Leggett
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