

"There is no water in the desert" - performance art at the SACO Biennial.

By Małgorzata Kaźmierczak

"There is no water in the desert. And the camels don't want to go any further. I don't have the strength to crawl anymore. I want to drink so badly." - sang the Polish band Bajm in 1982. The song then had a clearly political meaning: the desert was a metaphor for the country under the regime and the water, the missing freedom. At some point in the song a conductor appears, drinking old wine and holding a whip. The image seems even more current now, in reference to the fierce neoliberalism that was born in Chile and served as an example for many countries, including Poland after 1989. The first time I heard about Chile and Augusto Pinochet as an authority for Polish politicians was when in 1999 I watched a famous Polish TV program "Tok Szok". The presenters - Jacek Żakowski and Piotr Najsztab interviewed the editor-in-chief of the *Życie* newspaper - Tomasz Wołek and a deputy Michał Kamiński who together with another deputy - Marek Jurek (absent from the TV program) gave Augusto Pinochet, who had been arrested in the UK, a gorget with an image of the Holy Mary. First they explained their motives: as Marek Jurek had stated earlier, they wanted to decorate Pinochet as the one who "saved Chile from the fate of communist Cuba and we should be grateful for that [...] - he said. The presenters then invited Chilean exile Mario Galdamez, who wept in the studio as he recalled how Pinochet's officials tortured him by placing electrodes on his genitals.

My next major encounter with Chile was, of course, Patricio Guzman's famous documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), which connects two famous desert features - Atacama as the site of the world's best astronomical observatory, and Atacama as the site of Pinochet's Chacabuco concentration camp, which held over 1000 political prisoners. In the film we also meet the "Women of Calama", the mothers, wives and sisters of the disappeared, who search for the tiniest fragments of bones or clothes that might help them recognize and finally bury their loved ones with due respect. The amazing thing is that they are doing it meticulously and methodically. They move the earth delicately and run the sand through their fingers as if they were touching something truly precious and fragile. The problem is that the work they have undertaken is on an unimaginable scale.



It would be very difficult to get rid of these associations when coming to the SACO Biennial whose theme is "Golpe", and which coincides with the 50th anniversary of Pinochet's *coup d'état*. As my field of interest is mostly performance art, I decided to focus on this one and there are two performance artists worth mentioning. One of them is Ivan Caceres (Bolivia) who made two almost completely invisible actions. One of them *A shifting plain like patience* in the Valley of the Meteorites in the desert. He simply undressed and put a large stone on his neck. By bending his head down, he constructed an image of a headless man: meaningful, simple and moving. At the same time, also thanks to the specific light and the choice of location, he sank into the landscape in a very subtle and respectful way. The vulnerability of the naked body contrasted with the cruel and overwhelming nature. Referring again to Guzman's film, "There is nothing, no insects, no animals, no birds. Yet it is full of history."



The other action that took place in the desert was *Trasladar un río*, by Julio Urbina (Peru). The artist first collects sand from the beach and fills bottles with sea water. Then he makes an outline of Chile, Peru and Bolivia with the sand in the desert, drinks the sea water and urinates marking the territory, and with the intention of creating a river. During all this time he wears a miner's uniform. There is something really radical about his gesture of drinking the sea water, which harkens back to the 1970s and 1980s, when artists were risking their lives in the name

of art. It evokes associations with the brutality of the past regime, which often disposed of its enemies by dropping them from helicopters into the ocean, but also - inevitably it refers to the "undocumented migration from Bolivia" - how it is euphemistically called in the press, often by human smugglers. Since 2021, the Bolivia-Chile border is also a major entry point for "irregular" Venezuelan migrants into Chile. The Chilean border is a literal threat. "Just in the high plateau, at the Chilean-Bolivian border, 42 minefields were sown, with a total of 22 988 antipersonnel and 8 765 antitank mines. That is, this was the most extreme application of teichopolitics —fortress policy—but in this case through the building of a wall of explosives that placed at risk not only foreign citizens but also Chile's own." - Gilberto Cristian Aranda Bustamante and Sergio Fernando Salinas Cañas write in their article.¹ The artist performs this action doomed to failure, and in the end he lies down in the space within the contours of the countries, absolutely fatigued. The Atacama Desert, with its piles of fast fashion clothes and the landscape destroyed by the mining industry, the mined borders and the scattered remains of people, contains everything we would like to hide. Urbina's actions is one of those works of art that drill the memory and do not let us forget.



The last performance I wanted to mention was the other invisible action by Iván Cáceres in the port of Antofagasta *El punto y la i, pis de cobre*. Invisible, because he completed it very early in the morning, during his morning jog along the coast, when it is still mostly occupied by people living in tents. The artist talked to these people and discovered that one of their

¹ Gilberto Cristian Aranda Bustamante and Sergio Fernando Salinas Cañas, "Minefields and Humanitarian Demining at the Chile-Bolivia Border: A Step-by-Step Approach {Minado-desminado humanitario en la frontera de Chile-Bolivia: Una dinámica gradual}," *Frontera Norte* 27, no. 54 (2015): 137-38.

biggest concerns is living in a place contaminated with condensed copper. Cáceres undressed and tried to embrace the containers and, again, urinated in front of them so that, as he commented on his own performance, "the body's waste is returned." The context of the port, the containers that formed a kind of installation that hid the material whose extraction causes so much damage to the environment and to people, and again - the vulnerability of the human body, were very significant. It is also worth mentioning that Iván Cáceres' performances develop naturally, when he feels the moment of inspiration, and he does not care about the public or the recordings of the actions. What matters to him is the here and now, which is the essence of performance art.

Bio:

Małgorzata Kaźmierczak – Ph.D. in History. Since 2004 an independent curator of art projects in Poland and USA, especially performance art events. Researcher and author of many essays and reviews. Between 2011-2014 – editor and translator of <http://livinggallery.info>; 2006–2012 – president of the Foundation for the Promotion of Performance Art “Keshet” in Kraków, Poland; 2012–2014 – managing editor of the Art and Documentation journal; 2014–2016 – director of the City Art Gallery of Kalisz, Poland. Between 2016–2017 – editor-in-chief of the Publishing House and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Painting and New Media of the Art Academy of Szczecin, Poland. Currently an Assistant Professor at the Pedagogical University of Krakow. Since 2020, vice-president of AICA Poland and AICA International.