

Art and Human Rights Day with an Exhibition of *Arpilleras* and an Interview with Roberta Bacic, Curator of the Conflict Textile Collection



Beauty can come from very dark places. In our network event on the 20th June 2017, we explored the way the arts can document and explore issues relating to human rights violations. The event was an opportunity for academics, artists and museum staff to meet and share their inter-disciplinary approaches to art. The intention was to explore the value of exhibitions and discuss the role of art in processes of peace building, trauma therapy and recovery.

The day began with an academic panel that focused on artistic practices created during the dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s and 1980s. The first speaker, Marcos Stuardo of King's College London, spoke about 'Cantos Cautivos / Songs of Captivity and Hope inside Pinochet's Prisons in Chile'. Cantos Cautivos is an archive of songs which were sung by prisoners during the dictatorship. Marcos reflected on the importance of music to the prisoners, and also on the archival importance of the recordings that remain from that time. He also explained that there was a darker side to the use of music in these camps. Although playing music and singing songs helped the prisoners keep up morale when they socialised together, it was also used to mask their cries when they were abused. As a group, we listened to a recording, which was made in 1974 or 1975 in the Chacabuco camp in Chile and we reflected on the happiness and beauty of the piece. Beauty can come from very dark places. We had access to some of the recorded songs, which added to the understating of this project that includes direct involvement of ex-Chilean prisoners.¹

¹ <http://www.cantoscautivos.cl>

Our second paper 'Appliquéd Archives: Textile Accounts of Conflict', was given by Elsie Doolan, an archivist and doctoral candidate at University College London. Doolan explored the way *arpilleras* (Chilean textile artworks) challenge traditional definitions of what tends to be considered a record. Doolan explored the concept of the archive and the fact that history tends to be told by male victors. She outlined the ethical duties of archivists and the importance of asking: who created these records and whose voice is missing from them?

Doolan's talk encouraged us to reflect on what art brings to the spectator as well as the way it gives legitimacy to the artist. Art is not simply didactic. The discussion centered on the way art elicits a response from the observer. What art brings out in viewers themselves is central to its potency, although the concepts and narratives that art can communicate form part of the process.

Following the academic panel on art and human rights, our attention moved to the practice of working with art. The second panel began with an exploration of art therapy. Hadassa Dwek is an artist who facilitates workshops with vulnerable people. Her paper, 'Art and Homelessness Therapy' explored the remedial value of art. Dwek spoke about the artistic space as one that can give a sense of home to homeless people and which allows them to re-frame their self worth by identifying as an artist or creator. Dwek observed that alternative forms of expression can address rage and other issues and she referred to the psychological phenomenon called the 'flow atmosphere', which is a state of intense focus in which people find creativity so rewarding that they lose a sense of time and become involved in an autotelic experience. Our conversation reflected on this flow state, which was originally defined by the theorist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi².

The exploration of the practice of art was then continued by artist Emanuela Cusins, of Wysing Arts Centre. In her performance paper, 'The Poetics of Violence in Art Contrasted with Direct Action through Art', Emanuela spoke about her own experience attempting to make political art but finding that she was unable to reach her audience due to the inaccessibility of contemporary aesthetics. Emanuela discussed the way art can address issues of power inequality. She described previous performances that were designed to disrupt conditioned thinking and prejudice against cleaners and spoke about her current project, which explores the way trauma and recovery can be represented in self-healing cement. Cusin's work on trauma is inspired by the analysis of complex post-traumatic stress in the book *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Beth Herman.³

The day ended with an exhibition of Chilean *arpilleras* and an interview with Roberta Bacic, the curator of the Conflict Textiles Collection. Bacic spoke about the history of the Chilean *arpilleras*, her own experience under the Chilean dictatorship and the donations that started the Conflict Textile Collection.

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

³ Judith Beth Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992).

Bacic demonstrated Ulster University's [digital archive](#) of conflict art. So far 332 pieces have been documented and 147 exhibitions and associated activities have taken place since 2008.⁴ A [special page](#) was opened in the archive to account for our seminar.⁵

Recently, Bacic has been developing a methodology for categorizing *arpilleras*, which helps deepen understanding of the language used in textile accounts of conflict. She explained this methodology, which takes into account the artistic genealogy of the *arpilleras* and the historical period when the actual conflict depicted occurred. The methodology, which is in the early stages of development, allows us to explore the relationship between the artists and the narratives depicted in the *arpilleras*. Bacic also discussed the role that the *arpilleras* play in the field of collective memory and their relationship with transitional justice. Bacic ended the discussion with a reflection on Susan Sontag's book "Regarding the Pain of Others".⁶

The following textiles were on display, alongside the books, catalogues, leaflets and posters about *arpilleras* that have been produced in the last 10 years:

- [Ganó la gente / People have won](#)
- [Corte de Agua 2 / Water Cut 2](#)
- [No a la impunidad 2 / No to Impunity 2](#)
- [Represión a los Mapuche / Repression of the Mapuche](#)
- [En memoria de Teresa Durán / In memory of Teresa Durán](#)
- [AUSENCIAS –PRESENCIAS Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo/Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo](#)
- [¿Dónde están nuestros hijos? / Where are our children?](#)
- [Vamos a la playa en micro / Lets go to the beach by bus](#)

The day was well attended and some participants found the discussions and art exhibition to be moving. The day ended with an opportunity for networking.

The event was supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Arts Council England (ACE) via the Exchange Project. It was organised by Lorna Dillon of the University of Kent. The venue for the event was provided by the Centre for Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge.



⁴ <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>

⁵ <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fullevent/?id=169>
http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/mediafiles/963_Art-and-Human-Rights-Network-Day-prog0617.pdf

⁶ Susan Sontag, *The Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books, 1993).

Bibliography

Beth Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora, 1992.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

Sontag, Susan. *The Pain of Others*. London: Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books, 1993.