

AUSTIN / DESMOND

FINE ART

Fragmented Dialogues **Art and Identity in 1980s Chile** **Text by Kurt Petautschig**

'Fragmented Dialogues' brings together the work of Mario Fonseca and Mauricio Valenzuela in an exhibition that presents a new and intimate look at the visual arts in Chile during the darkest years of the Pinochet dictatorship.

When looking at the development of the image in Latin America from the stand point of its production to its circulation, it is essential to read and interpret it both historically and politically. In other words, it is marked by a logic that lends it form and structure; a logic defined by the resistance, violence and political upheavals that shaped Latin America, and Chile in particular, from the 70s until the early 90s. Against this backdrop, the image takes on an ambiguous political role. On the one hand, it constitutes a record of the 'disappeared' and the possibility of a symbolic or conceptual resistance. On the other hand, it was an incriminating, controlling and vital instrument in the machinery of horror deployed by the state, during the Chilean dictatorship (1973–1990). This temporal context places both artists in a universe that is defined by the common denominators of violence, fear, marginalization, absence and fracture. Their visual dialogue is articulated and woven around these factors as it emerges from the shadows of time and unfolds as fragments.

Fonseca and Valenzuela conceived their work from the margins of society, at a time when reporting on current national events carried a constant threat for photographers and visual artists. From the moment either Fonseca or Valenzuela picked up the camera, whether to take a self-portrait or a photograph in the street, that threat became imminent. Continuous state surveillance meant that this simple act was loaded with fear and danger, but also with hope. The hope was to capture an image that could embody an idea, feeling or intention and would allow both artists to emerge from the grey fog of oppression and take a breath.

Photography meant both a liberation and a shackle. Fonseca and Valenzuela were aware of that duality, and the risks of the path they took during that period. Their work stood at the borders of the then recognised, albeit selectively, groups and movements of the neo avant-garde scene. Reassessments of the artistic movements of the period has meant that, over time, their respective importance and influence on the visual art scene has been reinstated and become the subject of extensive research. Mauricio Valenzuela was a founding member of the collective AFI (Independent Photographers' Association) and although he was active in the group from 1981-1989, he was not one of the group's most recognized representatives. His personal perspective went against the rigid visual journalistic and documentary format adopted by the other AFI photographers. Valenzuela's unique gaze, in the street photography genre, led to a documentary practice that stood as a metaphor of resistance against a regime that imposed its power with unabated brutality.

Mario Fonseca played an active and creative role, as a publisher, designer and editor of articles by members of the neo avant-garde movement known as the *Escena de Avanzada* (Avant-Garde Scene). This group was made up of emblematic artists who expressed themselves through a conceptual and contemporary discourse. Fonseca does not appear to be associated to that group, despite making a series of conceptual works that he exhibited in the *Escena de Avanzada's* iconic gallery, Galería Sur, in 1982 under the title 'Habeas Corpus'. The role of the AFI and the *Escena de Avanzada* was effectively given legitimacy through the discourse of a few critics who endorsed particular political and aesthetic ideas as prerequisites in belonging to either group. This resulted in the inclusion of some artists at the expense of the exclusion of others, such as Fonseca and Valenzuela, which ultimately led to their erasure from the visual history of that period.

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“Fragmented Dialogues” is the symbolic image of a missing topography in the mapped history of the Chilean visual arts. It stands for those fragments that left no trace and for the convergence of two stateless subjects of a homeland trapped in violence, working in a symbolic productive space that was restrictive and exclusive. It offers testimonies from behind the cracks, the persecution, the surveillance, and the suffocating impossibility of being different – as a principle of identity – in the face of overwhelming homogeneity.

The works in the exhibition illustrate the complex relationship between the image and the individual. Photography, and the way that it plays with the reflection and inversion of light, suggests traces of something that is present in both Valenzuela and Fonseca’s images: intangible visions that constitute stories of a fractured and forbidden identity. In his work Mario Fonseca realises a series of actions that keep him on the brink of being seen or captured in the mainstream field of vision, on the very edge of being identified and questioned. He is in danger of exposing his face to a State that unleashed the full force of its apparatus to ‘disappear’ individuals, and which paradoxically, left only photographic images of the disappeared as a mark of their timeless presence. Mauricio Valenzuela, meanwhile, composes a constellation of absences through greyscales, slashes and obstructions to an eye searching for a face, a body or a hint of something recognisable in a void that has already devoured everything, including the artist.

“Fragmented Dialogues” highlights the struggle of marginalised artists unable to express themselves. Both Fonseca and Valenzuela were effectively caught between the throws of two dictatorships. On the one hand they had to circumvent the violent and repressive censorship of the military regime and on the other hand they had to assert themselves against the dictates of those who were writing and validating what would become the ‘official’ history of the visual arts under a dictatorship that lasted 17 years.

When images betray the illusion of the narrative and appear foreign, invisible, nebulous or anonymous, the question of history becomes paramount. What is history when it is recounted from the perspective of a visual reconstruction that stood at the periphery? Fragments of a veiled history, of conflicts, visibilities and silences of shipwrecked palimpsests that now resurface, speak up and offer us a glance into the vacuum: a secret now uncovered, through the voice of two men that traversed that era.

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