

A Unique And Inevitable Voice

During the military regime of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile, the Museo Popular de Arte Contemporáneo Vicente Aguilera Cerni in Vilafamés, Spain, became the home ‘in exile’ of the Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende. Known today as Museo de la Solidaridad, this had been formed in 1971 with works donated by artists from across the globe in solidarity with Chile’s political process under its newly elected President Salvador Allende and his Unidad Popular government. This donation of art works was a critical response from hundreds of contemporary artists to the political pressures being exerted on Allende’s government by the then President of the United States of America, Richard Nixon, orchestrated by his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger through the CIA and North American corporations with interests in Chile like ITT and Anaconda, to disrupt the Chilean democratic process. The U.S. boycott and the following international isolation of Chile led to the 1973 military coup and Allende’s consequent suicide. The Museo de la Solidaridad remained in exile for eighteen years, during which the town of Vilafamés, as the custodian of about two hundred and fifty works by artists such as Joan Miró, Eduardo Chillida, Lucio Muñoz, Antoni Muntadas, Juana Francés, Equipo Crónica and Antoni Tàpies, became part of the international geography of Chilean resistance.

The Vilafamés museum currently houses the Centro Internacional de Documentación Artística (CIDA), a collection consisting mainly of the library and archives of historian and art critic Vicente Aguilera Cerni (1920–2005). Among its contents are documents on the custody of the Museo de la Solidaridad up until its final transfer to Chile in 1991 with the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship. It is a small legacy consisting of touring exhibition catalogues and itineraries, lists of works, and correspondence of various kinds. Within these ‘Chilean materials’ are photocopies of three documents that refer to the projection at the 1974 Venice Biennale of an interview with Salvador Allende filmed in 1972 at the presidential palace of La Moneda in Santiago by the Italian journalist Empedocle Maffia (1943–2008).

The film, titled ‘Salvador Allende Speaks to the North American People’, was recorded on 16mm to be broadcast by CBS in order to let Allende’s voice be heard in the United States. The television channel, however, finally rejected the film, and it was not until 1974 during the Venice Biennale, with Chile already plunged deep in Pinochet’s violent military regime, that the film was publicly shown for the first time. Carlo Ripa di Meana, president of the Biennale, wrote the following press release: “I believe that President Allende’s interview constitutes a document that can be defined as historic. Especially during this time of influential revelations and confessions by high-level sources within the United States concerning the interference of multinational corporations in Chile’s internal process during the Unidad Popular government, Allende’s testimony on these same interferences is a unique and inevitable voice for anyone wishing to understand the ‘case of Chile’. The Biennale, a cultural entity with an international audience, could not ignore such a document, and becomes the vehicle for its dissemination for the first time ever, in the certainty that we are fulfilling a clear duty towards culture and information”.

The film’s whereabouts are lost after the Venice Biennale. The three photocopied documents kept in the CIDA archive in Vilafamés, along with entries in the records of the Venice Biennale, are the only traces found as yet, which goes to show the importance of a small provincial museum in keeping alive the memory of a political dissidence, and of an act made in solidarity with it. Faced with Allende’s absent voice, its trace contained in a handful of photocopies, the landscape of Vilafamés that can be observed from one of the archive’s windows becomes a counter-image, or a photographic manifestation of that absence.