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## **Torture Sees and Speaks: Guillermo Núñez's Art in Chile's Transition**

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### **Introduction**

Like the nearby former concentration camp Villa Grimaldi, Guillermo Núñez's home was hard to find. Núñez lives at the base of the *cordillera* in Macul,<sup>1</sup> once the outer edge of Santiago and now an ever-expanding suburb of the megacity that has quickly filled up with condominiums and new viñas. On the land was a modest adobe house, shared with literary and cultural critic Soledad Bianchi, and a shed full of thousands of his paintings on the theme of torture. In many ways, his home and land served as a symbol of resistance to the street upon street of sameness, an analysis that Núñez also proffered. His art studio, a modernist structure that allowed light to flood through a series of small windows, was located down a short path from the rear entrance of the house; tacked up on walls, and scattered across long carpenter tables was

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<sup>1</sup> The *Cordillera* refers to the Andes Mountains, and Macul is an area where there were many land takeovers and struggles over land ownership during the 1960s and 1970s.

his artwork in various stages. Indeed, the subject and body of torture sat squarely at the center of the artist's creative production.

Guillermo Núñez makes visual representations of the emotional, psychic, and physical body in pain under abnormal conditions of duress and destruction by the hand of State power.<sup>2</sup> As a survivor of torture during Augusto Pinochet's regime (1973-1989) Núñez's artwork and testimonials have a critical and instructive take on the transition to democracy period (1990-present), which has been characterized by the continuation of the military regime's economic liberalization policies. It is not a coincidence that Núñez's home space, land, and art-scape *feel* antithetical to the commodity culture and real estate trends in the nation, since these economic trends were made and reconciled through repression of the individual and collective body and the social dreams of an earlier period. In other words, the subject of the tortured body cannot be separated from the neoliberal turn in the nation: It was, after all, through severe punishment of the social and individual body that the military state imposed its multifold project of "fiscal discipline," free trade, flexibilization of labor, the privatization of state enterprises, and reentrance into global capitalist economic structures.<sup>3</sup>

Primarily through Núñez's work, I show how the tortured body and its representational lead to a confrontation with the social costs of the oft-touted "economic miracle."<sup>4</sup> A focus on underpaid workers, increasing income gaps, social inequality, policy measures, weakened unions, and a bleak environmental picture reveal the failures of the neoliberal economic model (Winn 2004, Barrera 1998, Collins and Lear 1995, Petras and Leiva 1994). This model has in turn damaged, further disenfranchised, and

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<sup>2</sup> The reference here is to Elaine Scarry's classic work *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). I adapt her term with this definition of torture that I use throughout.

<sup>3</sup> See Miguel Barrera, "Macroeconomic Adjustment in Chile and the Politics of the Popular Sectors," in Philip D. Oxhorn and Graciela Ducatzenzeiler, eds. *What Kind of Democracy? What Kind of Market? Latin America in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), for a very good overview of the process of economic restructuring under both the authoritarian government and economic regime.

<sup>4</sup> "The Miracle of Chile," now commonly referred to as "the Chilean Miracle" in the mainstream press, was a term coined by Milton Friedman to describe Pinochet's support for economic liberalization with dramatic social and economic consequences.

produced the most marginalized groups of the nation (the rural female labor force, workers more generally, indigenous populations, and immigrants, especially those from Peru). Another way to think about the high social costs of the economic model is through history and culture, especially the political work of torture, its expression and experience, and the incommensurable rift it produced for targeted 'dissident' subjects in the nation.

The explicit aim of torture was to tame the promise and later the memory of the tidal wave of mobilizations that had culminated into the *Unidad Popular*, Allende's Popular Unity political alliance. Within the ideological framing of the Cold War and US geopolitics in the region, secret police agents used torture as the means to extract information from militants and others it labeled subversives and terrorists. As would be repeated elsewhere in Latin America and globally, the state invented the rhetoric of civil war as a means to justify human rights violations against civilians, even though the vast majority of the population was unarmed.

During the early to mid 1970s, torture punished revolutionary thought and action by destroying what had become an increasingly radical and convergent popular social movement. In concentration camps such as Villa Grimaldi, where Guillermo Núñez was captive, torture was a means to disaggregate social activism both by physically diminishing collective activities and by spreading fear in the wider populous. Further, torture fashioned and sealed a culture of silence that lasted long after the practice was abolished. During the transition to democracy in the 1990s, tens of thousands of torture survivors were all but forgotten by the Chilean state, until very recently. Discussing, however minimally, those who were disappeared or executed, was a politically more expedient subject than facing torture survivors, the nation's living ghosts.

Guillermo Núñez's art forms a pedagogy on history, memory, and the economic policies of the contemporary era by making visible, and helping the viewer to approximate, the forms of violence on the body carried out by the state. Núñez uses abstract art as a non-realist form of representation to show what are inevitably the most difficult and least communicable dimensions of the torture experience. Through images that

disrupt linear temporality, experiment with negative space, and play with the spatial configurations of bodies and body parts, Núñez meditates on torture and its afterlife. In his work as a mediator of memory, Núñez offers detailed testimonials of his detention, torture, exile and *living with* torture. Ultimately, Núñez's art and political performances call public attention to the plight of thousands of torture survivors whose subjectivity continues to be structured by dictatorship violence.

Not unlike other forms of cultural memory (i.e., representations of history with shifting contextual meanings), visual art has the capacity to speak to, contest, elaborate upon, and produce collective experiences that escape the domain of "national politics as usual." For South African apartheid, Annie Coombes contends that visual and material means are critical sites of public debate "for the construction of new national histories" (2003: 7). As Marita Sturken's shows, "memorials, objects, and images [and] the body itself" are sites of memory, struggle and making meaning (1997: 12). Núñez's work is a form of cultural memory that makes visible the structural links between bodies in pain and national concealments, thereby providing an alternative narration of historical memory. Through repetition of the torture motif, as I explain, Núñez's art shows what economic globalization has put into the blind field, namely the disposable bodies of state violence.

### **Formations**

Leading up to and during Allende's presidency, national consciousness opened up to multiple viewpoints and perspectives on the nation. This took place within the economic realm in the form of the socialist path as "the better alternative" (as a binary view of the period might have it), and importantly within the realm of the arts, music, and theater. This heteroglossia produced an expanded view of what was possible, especially by expanding notions of citizenship. Guillermo Núñez is the emblematic figure for a generation of artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals who saw, tasted, imagined, and worked for another 'road for Chile,' a path of possibility that meant to redress historical injustice and lack of civil liberties.

Of the same generation as the great painter Roberto Matta, Núñez began his career in art during the nineteen fifties. Working first in theater designing sets and costumes, he later took up the formats of painting and installation art, which felt natural to him.<sup>5</sup> While in theater, he knew my grandfather, a reporter-turned-theater director who had taken up refuge in Chile from fascism in Europe. This familial connection with Núñez emerged as we sat talking under the avocado trees by his house. The irony of their experiences was not lost on me: in 1975, Núñez was exiled to my grandfather's country of origin, seeking refuge from fascist Chile.

Even prior to his own experience as a survivor of torture, Núñez's paintings reflected a deep concern and engagement with violence and its effects, expressing an explicitly leftist artistic and social agenda. Issues of collective memory and forgetting, central concerns in his paintings of the last thirty years are eerily anticipated in two abstract paintings of 1963, both titled "*No hay tiempo para el olvido*" ("There is No Time to Forget"), a phrase he used thirty years later to politicize young audiences at the University of Macul while speaking on his own encounter with torture. In these works, there was already a technical effort to imagine and communicate the intimate specter of violence.

Núñez's career was marked to an extraordinary degree by the history of politics in the nation. The most poignant instance of this was his role as director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art during Allende's term, a highly visible role given the merger of culture and politics at the time. Poetry, literature, mural brigades, music, popular theater, film production, and performance pooled from a rich and diverse set of cultural nationalist and avant-garde movements, and then flowed into a massive cultural effort illustrating the ideals, contentions, and ideologies that brought Salvador Allende to power in 1970.<sup>6</sup> In the paintings chosen for a retrospective from this earlier period one can see that Núñez was in dialogue with national and international artistic movements, even while

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with Guillermo Núñez, Santiago, March 29, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See the special issue on *Arte y Política: Desde 1960 en Chile* of the *Revista de Crítica Cultural* (No. 29/30, November 2004), directed by Nelly Richard, for a visual and narrative review of the plethora of cultural efforts from 1960 forward.

the coherency of the subject matter was about political violence and its afterlife.<sup>7</sup> The techniques Núñez first developed to communicate violence were later used to denounce Pinochet's military dictatorship, a move consonant with his art of social engagement.<sup>8</sup>

By 1974 Núñez's artistic work openly implicated the Chilean dictatorship and its violence, a dangerous stance amidst increased murders, disappearances and detentions.<sup>9</sup> The pivotal event in Núñez's career was an exhibition he inaugurated in Santiago, where he used objects, like cages and wired shut packages, to evoke military repression. These unconcealed metaphors were not lost on the dictatorship's censors: Núñez's exhibit was forcibly closed three hours after it opened. He was then arrested and put into the Los Alamos concentration camp.<sup>10</sup>

It is ironic, though not surprising given his political orientation and the turbulent times, that Núñez first painted on themes of violence that occurred in other nations, and then was directly affected by it. As he states, "I was always concerned with violence in other places. I painted themes related to Vietnam and the war. My work dealt with the violent situation in the U.S. South and violations against African Americans, and with Auschwitz. And then political violence came here, and those things happened to me."<sup>11</sup> Núñez's insight that later "those things happened to

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<sup>7</sup> See Catalogue for *Retrato Hablado* (Speaking Portrait), Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad de Chile, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> In my time with Guillermo Núñez, he repeatedly talked about his artistic expression as social commitment. Ironically, the repeated dangers of cultural imperialism in Chilean revolutionary discourses of the time (as an example one only has to think of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's well-known text *How to Read Donald Duck*) did little to change the 'American' pop art influence on Núñez's art.

<sup>9</sup> In these early denouncements there seems to be a dialogue with José Balmes, a well-known Chilean painter who also conveyed the experience of terror in his art. Balmes is an abstract painter whose work on state terror is well known in the country. He also appears in Patricio Guzmán's *Obstinate Memory* (1997). One of his recurring images is the shovel against a backdrop of Chile's flag (i.e. to depict the work of unearthing bodies from mass graves) and he also paints images based on photographs of the military coup. The two artists found each other as exiles in France and exhibited their work together in multiple venues.

<sup>10</sup> Núñez also was captive in Villa Grimaldi, and later, in Puchuncaví (Interview with Guillermo Núñez, March 12, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> "Siempre me preocupaba de la violencia en otros lados. Pinté acerca de Vietnam, y la guerra allí, me preocupé por la situación de violencia en el Sur de Estados Unidos con los negros y las violaciones, y Auschwitz. Y de repente llegó la violencia a Chile, y me pasaron esas cosas a mí" (Ibid).

me” is a useful way to think about the transformation in Núñez’s subject position and perspective, namely from informed politicized artist (somewhat distanced from the experience of violence) to becoming a direct victim, and later survivor of, torture. In many ways his shifting subjectivity reflects wider structural processes, both of US global intervention, and of human rights activism in the region.

As an exile in France during the mid seventies, Núñez’s art had an important testimonial dimension to it. In Europe, art about dictatorships in Latin America, in the context of the aftermath of World War II, and the rising tide of progressive politics, anti-colonialism, and anti-intervention sentiments, was given a positive reception.<sup>12</sup> Because of the international involvement in, and the global promise of, Allende’s Socialist path, Chilean exiles occupied a privileged position in the European leftist imaginary. In many ways artists and intellectuals like Núñez enjoyed the richness of cultural and political life stimulated by that reception. In stark contrast, after returning to Chile in the late eighties, Núñez found himself in a cultural desert in a nation still under the rule of dictatorship. As he told me with some dismay, the press barely noticed his presence.<sup>13</sup> If the lack of press visibility can be attributed to the erasure, containment, and censorship of the Allende period by the Pinochet regime, then it was also due to the fact that Núñez was caught within the web of the multiple, often negative narratives about returning exiles.<sup>14</sup>

After Núñez’s own encounter with violence, the symbols in his art that were used to reference other national conditions now came to reference Nuñez’s personal encounter with captivity and exile. Emblematic of this was Núñez’s piece *Libertad Condicional* (“Conditional Freedom,”

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<sup>12</sup> Núñez corroborates the suggestion that his art was understood in Europe, particularly in France, saying that he was “well received there” (Interview, March 12, 2002). Again, there was a connection between Núñez’s positive reception and leftist politics, as François Mitterrand was in power at the time, and the student mobilizations peaked. In the eyes of the French left, Salvador Allende’s government and the massive social movements were an important social project, whose exiles were exalted as national heroes.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Guillermo Núñez, March 12, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is that he was marginalized within the ranks of those who viewed exiles as lacking the courage and strength of those who stayed. Of course, this latter position was a move to deny the ‘forced’ character of the experience of political exiles.

Drawing/Mixed Media, 1975), where Núñez superimposed two duplicate images sketched in negative space onto his national identification card. Across the self-portraits is text written in French, which calls attention to his position as an exile, a subject that is in between national categories of legal identification. In the juxtaposition between the sketched self-portrait inside the frame and his 'carnet' photo, Núñez finds a trope for exile, a symbol of the state's breaking its contract with the citizens. Furthermore, Núñez's national identification was literally and figuratively stripped from him through the violence enacted on his body and subjectivity. By enacting this in his art, the self was doubled to show the legal, psychic, and emotional distance that political violence produced. Accordingly, the work expressed dislocation, deterritorialization, and emasculation as byproducts of the authoritarian government's attack on targeted subjects.

In Núñez's effort to reference torture he continued his aesthetic preference for and involvement with abstract art, enabling him to illustrate the unperceivable character of torture.<sup>15</sup> Abstract art afforded him the opportunity to visually represent the shadow spaces of the torture scene, the unimaginable pain of the torture experience for the subject, and to imagen the spatial and temporal simultaneity that torture produces, as I later explain. In his work, he also showed the nefarious character of torture. As Núñez said, "They are intimate works in that I don't make concessions, like I have never done. Every time they're uglier. What one sees is increasingly frightening."<sup>16</sup> "Only Morning Dew on the Face. Only your Scream in the Wind" (*Sólo el rocío en la cara. Sólo tu grito en el viento*, Acrylic on Canvas, 1978) (Picture 1) displays a body severed in parts, strung up and suspended in the air. Blood, symbolized through strips of paint in various shades of red, travels through the capillaries of the figure, and spills out at a number of points onto a white backdrop. The body is immersed in the pain of torture, paralleling the wider social body's

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this genre see Mel Gooding, *Abstract Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). To put the work of Guillermo Núñez into the context of twentieth century Chilean art work see Julio Ortega, *Caja de herramientas: prácticas culturales para el nuevo siglo chileno* (Santiago: Lom Ediciones, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> "Son íntimas en el sentido que no hago concesiones, como nunca las he hecho. Son cada vez más feas. Lo que se ve es cada vez más espantoso." Interview with Claudia Amigo, *La Nación*, May 31 1995.



experience of disruption and dislocation avowed by the dictatorship. Again, these images are not easily consumable (“Would you want one of these hanging over your dining room table?” he asked me),<sup>17</sup> which is why Núñez continued to collect hundreds upon hundreds of them in a rusted warehouse. Structurally, the global art market that reproduces Latin American identity as pastoral, kitsch or romantic, or on the other hand prizes the experimental, may have little place for Núñez’s portrayal of State violence and its effects its main subjects.

Picture 1



“Sólo el rocío en la cara. Sólo tu grito en el viento”  
 (“Only Morning Dew on Your Face. Only Your Scream in the Wind”)

Acrylic on Canvas, 1978

Read in their social and political milieu, Núñez’s paintings insist on returning to the original torture scene as a way to screen out forgetting, oblivion, or its opposite, the hyper-visibility of torture within public arenas.<sup>18</sup> Equating torture with social and economic dislocations is a focal

<sup>17</sup> Interview with author, March 22, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> On the operations of invisibility and hypervisibility see Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: A Sociology of Haunting* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

point for Núñez's art precisely because it speaks to wider individual and social ruptures glossed over by processes of national reconciliation.<sup>19</sup> As survivors are publicly rendered and forced towards closure (through truth commissions, reports, and political rhetoric as a management strategy), communicating with any depth about the complexity of living with torture becomes increasingly impossible.

### **Expendable bodies and torture's screen**

A central tenet of political violence is that it produces a crisis of national identity, wherein the nation's "system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life" (Bhabba 1990:2) becomes totally destabilized. After crisis, newly rendered nations employ expendable bodies, or what Kelli Lyon-Johnson terms "dead body politics" (2005: 205), as a way to remake national identity, especially through the rhetoric of social peace, cooperation, and reconciliation. Like incomplete human rights accountability processes, these oft-repeated words are ways to create governability in the process of rebuilding a nation. How does art about torture put on display what is concealed by the politics of remaking a nation?

Saskia Sassen understands that there are "important components of globalization," which are in fact "embedded in particular institutional locations within national territories" (1998: xxix). One of the central locations of globalization in the aftermath of State violence, indeed where it gains traction at the level of the nation state, is through the rhetoric and framework of establishing political democracy, which, for nations in transition, means human rights investigations, commissions, and truth reports. Put differently, the framework of political democracy (often through truth commissions) becomes one format for producing the new

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Press, 1997). One important recent case of hypervisibility and torture emerges from the hegemonic media channels' circulation of photographs from Abu-Ghraib that reproduce, for instance, the nameless and faceless subject of U.S. violence. Citing Ralph Ellison's comments about the African American male subject (*Invisible Man*), Gordon argues that hypervisibility is often an alibi for invisibility (16-17).

<sup>19</sup> In fact, the very term reconciliation has religious connotations, the altering of "man's" relationship to the Christian God, through the narrative of salvation.

national identity. The “expendable bodies” of political violence are not merely surplus, or of limited value to the new regime, but central figures of political staging that work to “rebrand” the nation in violence’s aftermath.<sup>20</sup>

In Chile, the most horrendous and extreme cases of human rights violations and those that resulted in physical death were first described through the Rettig Truth Commission (1991) and later through the National Roundtable for Dialogue (*Mesa Nacional de Diálogo*, 1998).<sup>21</sup> These victims’ stories of mutilated and disappeared bodies were instrumentally used to show that the nation had moved on from its violent past. By 2004, under Ricardo Lagos’ administration, cases of torture were granted full-scale public investigation, namely through the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture Report (what is commonly known as the Valech Report). Until very recently, accountability through the legal realm had been severely curtailed (most notably on September 6, 2006 when the former dictator Pinochet was stripped of his immunity). Prior to this, institutional barriers (e.g., the 1979 Amnesty Law, changes to the 1981 Constitution, and a corrupt tribunal court system) had made it all but impossible for the crimes of the dictatorship to be legally prosecuted, even while State rhetoric continued to signal that the excesses of the past had been squarely addressed.

As was true in many Latin American authoritarian regimes, torture was a main strategy of counterinsurgency, a highly organized activity, and a public secret, illustrated by the (then meaningful) fact that except with a series of modifications, the Pinochet dictatorship refused to sign the United Nations Convention against Torture.<sup>22</sup> As former President Lagos

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<sup>20</sup> I use the term “rebrand” intentionally here to point out how new narratives of nation are not made purely through national exigencies of reconstruction, but are also reconstituted through consumer capitalism’s expansion.

<sup>21</sup> This latter effort only happened in 1998 after Pinochet’s London arrest, when the democratic government was eager to bring Pinochet back to Chile and publicize that it could take care of human rights business itself, a point many critics doubted. The National Roundtable was the conversation between members of the human rights community, the government, and the military, a national process that failed to clarify the whereabouts of many disappeared bodies.

<sup>22</sup> Even then Pinochet and his advisors made a series of qualifications and exceptions to the rules of the Convention. See “Recopilación de Documentos

acknowledged, about ninety-four percent of the more than thirty thousand documented detainees experienced the horror of torture.<sup>23</sup> Specialized techniques were gleaned and imported from the U.S. and Brazil, including such methods as the submarine (*el submarino*), the grill (*la parrilla*) and being hung from a rod by the wrists (*pau arrau*). Other methods of torture included being forced to view another's torture, and threatening physical, psychological and emotional pain as a means to not only retrieve information, but to instill fear and resignation in its victims.<sup>24</sup> Incorporated into all detentions,<sup>25</sup> torture was used against tens of thousands of Allende supporters, MIR activists, the Christian Left, Socialist and Communist party members, and anyone allegedly supportive of, or for that matter in some way deemed close to, one of these affiliations.

Though some human rights organizations and efforts exerted political pressure, the military regime continued to deny the existence of torture, even up until the end of the dictatorship and beyond. As government spokesman Orlando Poblete said, "In Chile, nobody is tortured. There is no repression and our government is founded on respect for the rights of individuals."<sup>26</sup> One would imagine that, due to its systematic, pervasive and illegal character, revelation of torture would be integral to the project of democracy from 1990 forward. Instead, the ubiquity of torture on male and female detainees, and to a greater degree the ubiquity of sexual torture of female bodies, was absent from the 1991 Rettig Report, which instead focused on political executions and disappearances.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the political and social justice effects of the

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Internacionales sobre Tortura, Convenciones y Otros," *Comisión Nacional Contra la Tortura*, Santiago, January 1989.

<sup>23</sup> I say "documented" here to refer to the cases that were detailed in the Valech Report. At the same time, as is often true with women survivors, ninety-five per cent of female torture victims experienced sexual torture. Ricardo Lagos, "Prologo: Reflexiones y Propuestas," Valech Report, November 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Eugenia Weinstein and Elizabeth Lira, "La Tortura," in Eugenia Weinstein et. al. *Trauma, Duelo y Reparación* (Santiago: Fasic/Interamericana, 1987: 33).

<sup>25</sup> "La Tortura en el Chile de Hoy," *Boletín Asociación de Abogados pro Derechos Humanos en Chile*, Number 1, November (1980: 7).

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International Report, "Chile: 50 Cases of Torture, Update II" (London: International Secretariat, September 1987).

<sup>27</sup> This three-volume 2,000-page report was the culmination of the work of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. On the day of its presentation, President Aylwin gave a formal apology to the relatives of the

report were further contained in a series of high-level negotiations, including the Peace Proposal that worked to uphold the 1979 Amnesty Law.<sup>28</sup> Highlighting select cases of torture, disappearance, and death, rather than expose the enormity and persistence of the torture problem, was discursively constructed as a means to foster social peace by a transition government comprised of ‘successfully integrated’ returned exiles.

However, the transition pact had to evolve to respond to unfolding global events, especially the high-profile global media event of Pinochet’s London arrest and attempted extradition to Spain. In the subsequent open political atmosphere, President Lagos commissioned the 2004 Valech Report detailing the cases of some 30,000 survivors. The report again worked to re-narrate the history of state violence, this time revealing the democratic government’s own silence about torture’s ubiquity. In broad terms, the report provided survivors with overdue symbolic compensation (in the form of recognition), and laid the foundation for material compensation (in the form of pensions). It also helped pave the way for Michelle Bachelet’s 2006 Presidential victory, as she herself was a survivor of torture.<sup>29</sup> With this as backdrop, how can we understand Núñez’s refusal to let go of this history?

One of the untenable differences with respect to torture is precisely between official discourse and its demand for narrative disclosure and the experiential non-discursive event of torture’s trauma. Tellingly the state, through the Valech Report and the implementation of its findings, imagines torture stories and material compensation as a way to reincorporate torture victims back into the nation state. In contrast, Guillermo Núñez continues

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disappeared. The subject of torture was a notable absence.

<sup>28</sup> See Felipe Portales, *Chile: Una Democracia Tutelada* (Santiago: Editorial Sudamericana Chilena, 2000), especially Chapter Four, “La consolidación de la impunidad” (“The consolidation of impunity”) for an important discussion of the pacts between political parties.

<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Valech Report was never tied to juridical prosecutions, and the only official body to retreat on its findings was members of the judiciary branch. In fact, the day after the Valech commission report was released, the president of the Supreme court, Marcos Libedniksy, claimed there was “no credible evidence and “that distinguished magistrates could have conspired with third parties to allow for unlawful detentions, torture, kidnappings, and murders.” Peter Kornbluh, “Letter from Chile,” *The Nation*, January 13, 2005.

to narrate torture as a space of exclusion from the nation state. In this way, his repetitive symbols of the body in pain are consonant with his analysis of Chile's transition.

On one level, one might read Núñez's painting of these repetitions as a reenactment of the psychic disintegration that torture produces, where art-making becomes a kind of individual therapy for the artist. At times, Núñez even renders his art on torture in this fashion, stating, "It doesn't matter to me what others think. This is what I want to be released from me."<sup>30</sup> Yet, by licensing Núñez the political agency he has always expressed, we arrive at a different conclusion regarding the repetitive motifs of his art on torture. As Raquel Olea comments, "The political sign of Núñez's work remembers things forgotten, observes the naked reality within white nothingness."<sup>31</sup> The white nothingness to which Olea refers, and what Núñez's paintings make visible, is the absence of social justice through redress for those who continue to bear the consequences of state terror in their bodies and in their daily lives.

Saidiya Hartman has commented eloquently on the link between redress and social justice, and her comments are useful for understanding political democracy's inability to redress in the aftermath of torture. In the case of slavery, as she argues, redress means and meant the re-stitching of the social fabric, or what she terms the "re-membering of the social body" (1997: 76). However, conditions of captivity and enslavement (and I'd add torture) are violent forms of rupture creating an enormous breach, making it impossible to "re-member" (76). Hartman poignantly states that "efforts to set things right would entail a revolution of the social order—the abolition of slavery, racism, domination and exploitation, the realization of justice and equality and the fulfillment of needs." When measured against Hartman's logic of what "setting right" in the aftermath of large-scale structural violence means, political systems of democracy, especially the earlier period of transition in Chile, fall far short. Núñez's paintings, his personal and artistic trajectory, and his testimonial practice of torture, in

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<sup>30</sup>"Me da lo mismo lo que piensen los otros. Eso es lo que yo quiero dejar que salga de mí." (Ibid.).

<sup>31</sup> Raquel Olea, "Textura del diálogo en la obra de Guillermo Núñez," *Guillermo Núñez: Retrato Hablado: Una Retrospectiva*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad de Chile, 1993.

fact, illustrate the incapacity of political democracy to set things right after torture.

Returning to the question of holding onto the past, the rift between the state and torture survivors is precisely the break between political democracy and its demand for narrative closure on the one hand, and on the other, the experiential legacy of torture that is inevitably a never-ending trauma. Guillermo Núñez's art exposes the impossibility of compensating for torture through institutional channels like state efforts at reconciliation. In fact, his art and testimony suggests that the only way to truly "re-member" torture is to make social justice a tenable practice.

### **Behind the blindfold**

The politics of Núñez's art on torture, like its counterpart in literary works and performance art during the dictatorship,<sup>32</sup> puts emphasis on the body as a site of violence, displacement, witness and contestation.<sup>33</sup> As I have mentioned previously, Núñez uses abstract art as a means to represent the nefarious and unperceivable condition of torture. In this section I discuss more specifically how he constructs exhibit spaces and artist talks (what end up being testimonials) in ways that produce awareness in audiences of the torture condition.

Perhaps the most recognizable and oft-repeated motif of Guillermo Núñez's art is the blindfold. In April 2002, I attended his exhibit, "Que hay en el fondo de tus ojos?" / "What is there in the depth of your eyes?" What lies behind (or remains after) torture was the central meaning of the blindfold metonymy. The exhibit space walls were covered with the faces of four ex-prisoners, photographs published in newspapers prior to captivity. Núñez turned all but two finished pieces into large two-foot black and white images, two of which were blindfolded. Spectators were asked by the artist to imagine and paint their own captivity by addressing the question:

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<sup>32</sup> To cite one famous example, Diamela Eltit and poet Raúl Zurita staged a performance where Zurita used acid on his face and body to show the body as the metonymic site of social erosion and political gain by the right, with torture as its central strategy.

<sup>33</sup> See the chapter "The Social Body and the Rebirth of History" in Alice A. Nelson's *Political Bodies: Gender, History, and the Struggle for Narrative Power in Recent Chilean Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002).

“What is in the depth of your eyes?” As a response, some people sketched in tears, blood, and other forms of evidence, while others drew in more fantastical elements, as if to depict interior landscapes. In this way, Núñez aimed to produce an ontological shift in audience position from the perspective of witness and observer to that of prisoner.

Picture 2



“Qué hay en el fondo de tus ojos” (“What’s at the depth of your eyes?”) by Guillermo Núñez, Mixed Media, 2002.

Rather than creating a distance between artwork and spectator—by merely witnessing the surface effects of violence, such as the scars, bruises, and bodily deformations that are the quintessential evidence markers of torture sessions—Núñez demanded participatory engagement with the



effects of terror. However, in the field site questions emerged: Is it possible politically to approximate torture through the imagination without direct experience of its pain? Does this approximation by the spectator become transformed in a way that ultimately diminishes the alterity and rupture of torture?

At the entrance of the exhibit floor Núñez painted illegible words to emphasize the inability of language narrate the experience of torture. In one corner, the artist placed scissors, pens, and pastel crayons asking people to draw their own hands, cut out the tracing, and place these cutouts on the wall beside several others. On the same table, Núñez left a mirror for spectators to hold as a way to invoke the face as a gesture of recognition (in contrast to the fractured identity of the tortured subject). The setup called attention to the body (through the faces and hands), subjectivity (through the mirror and in the signature), torture (through the blindfold), and death (through the makeshift memorial).

Núñez invited participants to draw their own rendering of the world that is lived behind the blindfold. Later, through his speeches and images, he asked audiences and spectators to produce the space of captivity by locating themselves in the position of the tortured subject. As I have suggested, in moments such as these, while potentially powerful for those involved, Núñez may desire too pure a space of empathetic attachment. This may be a space that is impossible to recreate outside of the prison or concentration camp. Still, Núñez offers the experience, narration, and imaging of torture as a source of social connection. For instance, speaking of his blindfolded imprisonment of more than five months is another important aspect of Núñez's performative work about the tortured body.<sup>34</sup> Diana Taylor conceives of "memories and survival strategies [as] transmitted from one generation to another through performative practices that include (among other things) ritual, bodily and linguistic practices" (2003: 108). Núñez does the work of this kind of cultural memory, where the ritual of transgenerational communication is central to his aesthetics and politics.

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<sup>34</sup> Personal communication with Guillermo Núñez, March 29, 2002.

At the closing event, a male student from the audience commented, “You paint and express the victim and the perpetrator. What force is there in the border between what is seen and what is not seen?” Núñez replied, “In 1974 I had my eyes bandaged day and night. I realized that I began to retreat into the world of imagination behind the eyes. No one has painted this world from where the spectator can imagine the situation.” In this quote, Núñez describes how the retreat into interiority becomes a condition and response to torture, where painting constructs a bridge to the external world, thus communicating an experience that is usually silent and silenced.

As Elaine Scarry has noted, pain is inherently inexpressible and unsharable made acute in cases of torture (1985), where speaking is shut down. And, as she notes, language fails in its apprehension of the body in pain because of the rupture of Self that torture produces.<sup>35</sup> In many ways the incommunicability of the torture experience is not the inability to narrate the experience, as recent testimonials from Abu Ghraib have shown, but the inability to represent the complexity and fullness of that which escapes narrative description. Núñez’s project, in fact, communicates the unimaginable to the spectator by shining a spotlight on the scene of torture. By repeating the symbol of the blindfold he makes visible the ongoing confrontation of the male body and psyche with torture, the process of approximating what the blindfold hides, the retreat to imagination that the blindfold forces, and the blindness of the nation to the deep breach that systematic torture produces. Further, I contend that Núñez’s testimonial of his blindfolded captivity is an important performance of gender vulnerability, since the ocular, or the power of sight, is an attribute of dominant masculinity. By discussing how his sight was blindfolded, Núñez unhinges the idea of the hegemonic heroic masculine subject. In this way, he shows the male body as a site of power’s inscription and revolutionary defeat.<sup>36</sup> Thus, his interactive art practice is a

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<sup>35</sup> See Elaine Scarry’s “Introduction” and “Chapter 1: The Structure of Torture” (3-59) in *The Body in Pain*.

<sup>36</sup> Here, I am reminded of the success stories of elite politicians of the *Concertación* party, many of which, like Núñez, were exiled to the US and Europe and returned to be recognized as national leaders of democracy. Unlike Núñez however, these mostly male returned exiles distanced themselves from public

form of disseminating what was lived through the body, both during and after the experience of state terror.

As scholars of memory Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa N. Knauer (2004) remind us, culture offers another way to remember and reimagine the nation after crisis. More specifically, historian Maria Angélica Illanes proposes that Núñez's artwork is not only an important repository of memory, but it also does important cultural work in the battle over memory and documenting the past (2002: 13). My own perspective is that this work is an important form of cultural memory that makes visible what is missed by the project of national reconstruction and the institutional processes of accountability.

### **Conclusion**

If the period leading up to the military dictatorship was characterized by a fuller acceptance of the nation's multiple subjectivities and routes to the future, then the tortured body represents the truncation of the possible (the severing of the heteroglossic tongue) producing silence instead. Since the social body is in need of repair after trauma, to remember (the history of brutality, ruptured social relations, and the body in pain) can potentially point the direction towards a more democratic future. Unlike the state efforts of reconciliation and limited accountability, which bring a limited form of democracy, cultural production about torture returns to the moment of rupture as a means to wrestle with the present's past. Guillermo Núñez's artistic practice that remembers, reenacts and narrates does a kind of cultural work about the body in pain that gives a visual language for the experiences of tortured subjectivity, a subjectivity that radically denies closure and forgetting.

One concrete product of Núñez's memory aesthetic is to uncover the nation's investments in neoliberal "progress." In public spheres such as universities and poor communities (where Núñez often displays and gives away his art), his cultural production contests the logics of consumer culture. The very subject of torture also confronts a neoliberal art market

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renditions of the violent past, sometimes serving as key brokers to negotiate pacts of silence about torture.

that avoids such unseemly things. In terms of its longer-term impact, Núñez's work is a pedagogical tool that enables younger generations to conjure up the often hidden history of torture in the nation, making visible and audible the pain that torture produces as part of the afterlife of violence.

As Núñez ironically asked, "Why does it matter what an old man paints?"<sup>37</sup> The perspective of the tortured subject can be confusing within a hegemonic discursive regime that is keen to publicize economic success, while downplaying—until the Valech Report—the bodies that display these consequences. Núñez speaks to a past that recalls the defeat of socialism in a present when neoliberalism seems unchallenged. In a rare public admission of this coupling one official declared, "We should ask for forgiveness for not having believed in private property and the market."<sup>38</sup> Núñez art recognizes the stabilizing logics of such couplings by recognizing the remnants of torture in the public sphere to construct openings towards democratic culture—the shadow spaces that political democracy has only tepidly reached. Perhaps the fact that Núñez very recently received the National Prize for Plastic Arts is a positive sign in that direction.

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<sup>37</sup> "Por que importa lo que pinta ese viejo?"

<sup>38</sup> María Angélica Illanes quotes this in her book, though she does not name the deputy she saw on television. One imagines it to have been the powerful entrepreneur Fernando Flores, the youngest minister in Allende's presidential cabinet, and now a prominent spokesman for neoliberal economics and politics in the country (Ibid: 15). The untranslated quote is "debemos pedir perdón por no haber creído en la propiedad privada ni en el mercado."

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