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Werken by Bernardo Oyarzún (Mapuche)

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At the 57th Venice Biennial in 2017, the Chilean Pavilion presented *Werken* (“the messenger”), an installation by Bernardo Oyarzún, who is of Mapuche (“people of the land”) descent. This project was conceived by the artist (b. 1963, Chile), and Ticio Escobar (b. 1947, Paraguay), a renowned curator who has long worked with indigenous communities and arts in South America (see Escobar 2017). Its central theme was the visibility of the Mapuche people. The exhibit provides an artistic approach and regional extension to discussions of ontology and indigenous rights often presented in this journal.

Werken filled an entire room at the *Arsenale* in Venice: over a thousand wooden *kollong* masks (used principally in Mapuche rituals and ceremonies), on thin metal sticks at eye level, were gathered at the center of the room, facing outward, toward visitors and the walls, where, at the same height, on a ribbon of LEDs, ran a list of some 6,907 Mapuche names that still survive despite the many violent attempts, over five hundred years, to make them disappear.

The Mapuche comprise a population of about 1.5 million, living on both sides of the *Cordillera de los Andes* on an ancestral territory called *Wallmapu*, located in today’s Chile and Argentina. They account for at least 10 percent of the Chilean population, and while being a strong presence in Chile, they are in a way silenced under the notions of “*mestizaje*” and the politics of assimilation (“Chilean-ness”). The Mapuche continue to struggle with the establishment, notably on issues of land and territories, but also on the nonrecognition of Mapuche ontology and their own viewpoints on history (see, for example, Cayuqueo 2017).

Bernardo Oyarzún often uses his personal experience in his artwork, and it is through art that he started exploring his Mapuche roots and political issues. He was born in the southern region of Chile and moved with his parents as a child to Santiago suburbs, where he still lives today. He graduated from art school in the late 1980s and has widely exhibited in Chile, South America, and farther afield. His breakthrough came with *Bajo Sospecha* (“Under Suspicion”; 1998), made after he was arrested for looking “Indian”—there is still a law in Chile for “prevention and preventive incarceration,” and, even worse, an “anti-terrorist” law (Amnesty International 2018) that mostly affects the Mapuche people.

Like other emerging Mapuche contemporary artists (for example, Francisco Huichaqueo), Oyarzún moves between multiple worlds, ontologies, and temporalities. He assumes a subtle position against the “politically correct,” which has created frictions with the establishment, in a context of the emergence of a new scene where indigenous artists in Chile are gaining voice and space. Oyarzún was one of the first Mapuche artists in Chile, and today younger artists follow his footsteps in contemporary art.

Oyarzún explores, critically and often from a peripheral viewpoint, anthropological, social, and historical elements to more fully present Chilean society, and to question the *constructed* image of the Mapuche. These elements inform the visual potency of *Werken*, which means “the messenger” in *mapudungun*: to use art as a messenger to open a dialogue between Chileans and Mapuche.

The artist sees being part of the Venice biennial as a representative of Chile and, by extension, other countries of the South American continent, as a good opportunity. Indeed, the presence of indigenous artists from South America in the big biennials still remains a rare or superficial occurrence—at the same event, Huni Kuni pieces were only *parts* of a major Brazilian artist’s installation. In this sense, an essential element for *Werken* has been the support from curators, cultural managers, and intellectuals who have valued artists of indigenous origin, recognized them, and put them on the same level as any other contemporary artist (see Mosquera 2006 and Richard 2018).

While mentioning that the primary concern in his art is aesthetics, not politics, Oyarzún has continually stressed that in Chilean society “any visualization lacks in density, because it

is treated banally” (quoted in Flores 2016). Elements contributing to Oyarzún’s achieving this “denser” visualization were having a strong piece of contemporary art, as well as a Mapuche viewpoint (cultural, spiritual, political, etc.).

The installation is filled with many layers of signification. The ensemble of masks is a group that could refer to the most important Mapuche ritual (the *Ngüllatun*) or to other community gatherings. The kollongs can refer to messengers or warriors but can also be reminders of colonization. The names relate to Mapuche territories, largely stolen by the state in the past. The relationship between the masks and the names animates the installation. Moreover, like other Oyarzún works, which are usually provocations, *Werken* can also be perceived according to Mapuche ontologies of artifacts, to relationships between and among humans, nonhumans, the living and the dead, and the *penma* (dreams); from this, it can also carry a political load.

But for those unaware of these various meanings or unfamiliar with the Mapuche context—whether because it was not provided (in the press release from Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes (2017), for example), or because in a large exhibition like the Venice Biennial visitors do not always read about the works—the masks constitute primarily an aesthetic vessel (with all the implications of masks in relation to making visible and hiding). Visitors could feel the strong *presence* of these mute but highly expressive faces. A forest of faces, a *community*. They are silent but look toward the Mapuche names that, in turn, highlight them in red: the masks’ individuality and identity rests in the list of names. In Venice, many visitors from all over the world were deeply moved by Oyarzún’s work: they took selfies, posted comments about their emotions on social media, and so on. This, and the many photographs in the art press, demonstrate that his work can have an international impact. *Werken*’s aesthetic presence demonstrates its ability to make “the Mapuche subject” more profoundly visible.

This work is powerful on various levels: the presence of the masks, along with the names, show themselves and watch the empathy of the viewer. As Oyarzún has stressed: in Chile “there is a cultural banalization. There are strategies of visibilization that keep the other marginalized, as I see it. This ambiguity game lies in *Werken*, an image that must be completed” (Castro Jorquera 2017; our translation). In this respect, and considering reflections on ontologies of artifacts and pragmatics involved developed by, for example, Severi (2018), the various ontologies, viewpoints, and “meanings” at play in *Werken* can be considered to produce an effective work.

Werken has been very well received by the public and critics in Venice and was shown in Chile a few months later, first at the [Parque Cultural](#) de Valparaíso, then in a [group show](#) at the Centro Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo (CNA) de Cerrillos (Santiago), and at the [Museo de Arte Contemporáneo \(MAC\) de Valdivia](#). It is now part of the state collections. The circulation of this work in various cities in Chile enabled it to become more visible and to earn Oyarzún recognition from his peers, the exclusive circle of Chilean contemporary art, as well as the general public.

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