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Chilean *Arpilleras*: Writing a Visual Culture

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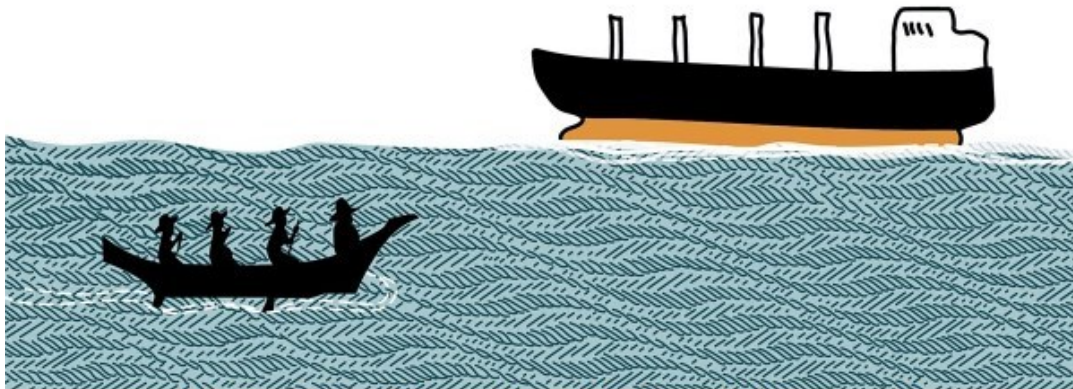
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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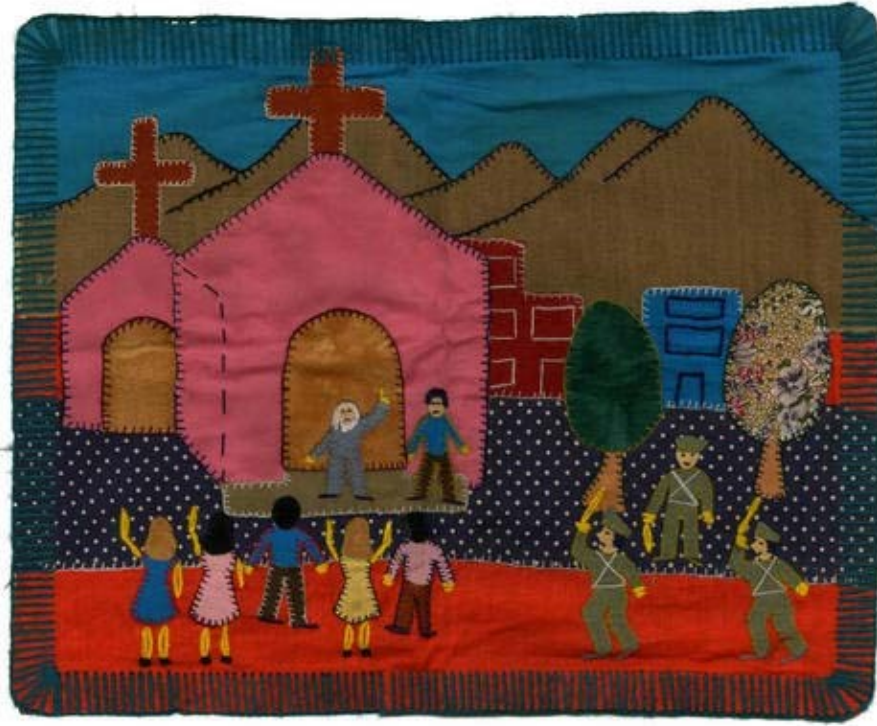
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Chilean *Arpilleras*: Writing a Visual Culture

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Demonstration outside of a church, 00001; M. Dieter collection
©Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile

Arpilleras, historically created in the home and sewn by hand, are constructions of pictorial narratives in which bits of discarded cloth are appliqued onto a burlap backing. The art form has been historically practiced in Chile for some time but arose to global prominence during a period of intense political oppression; these works of art, created in response to the atrocities committed by the Pinochet regime from 1973 to 1990 have served, and continue to serve, as seditious and reconstructive forms of visual culture.

As a fiber artist with more than a passing familiarity with the *arpillera*, I was tremendously excited when my University invited me to travel to Chile in May 2016. Certainly, as the Chilean government had transitioned back to its democratic roots for more than 16 years at that point, I envisioned that that the once powerful form of political resistance would no longer tell personal stories of oppression. But I did not anticipate the manner in which contemporary *arpilleras* would completely ignore that history. Displaying playful images of idealized rural Chilean life and landscapes filled with sheep and geese, the modern *arpillera* is sold in street markets and tourist shops. These works, once a subversive way to communicate to humanitarian organizations outside Chile, have now become bright, colorful commodities packed into suitcases and proudly shared as souvenirs.

This robust part of Chilean tourism -- sold as wall-hangings, table runners, and cards, among other items - are no longer crafted by hand but instead, are manufactured by machine and then embellished with some embroidery in large workshops. I wondered in what ways are contemporary manifestations of the *arpillera* reflecting the Chilean cultural and political identity yet ignoring it as well? This question led me to return to Chile earlier this year and has become the basis for this paper and presentation.

Not assuming everyone is familiar with these works, I will first share a brief history of the *arpillera* and discuss hallmarks of the works. Then I will address the contemporary manifestations of the artform. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion problematizing the relationship of contemporary *arpilleras* to their predecessors and the impact of commodification on our perceptions of the artform.

Origin of the Chilean *Arpillera*

The term *arpillera* used to denote the wall hangings, stems from the Spanish word for burlap.¹ These appliqued and embroidered works range in size but as they were originally made from used flour and wheat sacks, the majority of them are relatively small – ranging from 9” x 12” to 12” x 18” inches. Many are surrounded by a crocheted frame.

From a distance you are struck by what appear to be colorful and playful scenes of domestic life organically composed of bright scraps of cloth. Yet closer inspection of these works reveals intense scenes of struggle, abduction, torture, and death. *Arpilleras*, are surprisingly powerful, hauntingly evocative and stirringly hopeful. Hidden in plain sight, and using common tools of needle, thread, and cloth, the women who crafted these works are known as *arpilleristas*.² The compositions they made provide a testimonial record of a nearly twenty-year history of oppression. And in the process of making these artworks, *arpilleristas* collectively transformed the political power of women in their country and, through a culture of resistance, undermined the traditional patriarchal structures that had kept Chilean women voiceless for far too long.

September 11th is a date that many associate with the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. But for many Chilenos, September 11th is a day that reverberates in their history, psyches, and memories. It was on that day, in 1973, when Augusto Pinochet staged a bloody military coup taking control of the government and four branches of the military from the democratically elected President Salvador Allende.³ *El Once de Septiembre*, the anniversary of which has just occurred a little over a week ago, marks the day in which martial law was declared in Chile. In the immediate aftermath – and for too many subsequent years - the secret police began a campaign of terror in which they rounded up members of the Socialist Party, appointees, union leaders, and anyone suspected of dissent.⁴ Some of these people were questioned and released. Others were imprisoned and tortured in places like Villa Grimaldi, some were exiled, and more than 3,200 – the *desaparecidos* (the disappeared) were permanently silenced. Most of these

¹ Marjorie Agosin, “Mirror of Strength: Portrait of Two Chilean Arpilleristas,” in *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall, 243-247 (New York: Perseus, 1997), 243.

² Ibid.

³ Julie Hector, “Removing the Silencer from the Gun: Women Creating a Collective Voice against the Pinochet Dictatorship,” *Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies Journal*, v.12, (2010-11), 63.

⁴ T. Radahl Morris, “From Healing to Hope: The Continuing Influence of the Chilean Arpilleras” *Kritika Kultura*, no. 26 (2016), 109.

individuals, though by no means all, were men. The women left behind- who themselves survived being detained, traumatized, and tortured- had little to no financial support, no knowledge of their loved one's whereabouts, and seemingly, no recourse for justice.⁵ Pinochet's economic policies resulted in widespread unemployment and underemployment where Chileans faced food shortages, curfews, and services once provided by the government – like water and electricity – now became profit producing infrastructures for the military regime meaning they were nearly impossible for those with little to no income to afford.⁶ New national security doctrines narrowly pushed women further into conventional and domestic familial roles.⁷ The prevailing belief, held by the former socialist government that women were politically uneducated and should passively remain in traditionally gendered (and silent) roles of wives and mothers, was further promulgated through ever more oppressive policies in the new military regime.⁸

Rather than capitulate to the tremendous injustices heaped upon them by the government, these women, alone both economically and psychologically fought back.⁹ The military junta underestimated the strength and persistence of Chilean women as *arpilleristas* shifted their roles, earned an income and subversively made the rest of the world aware of the atrocities besetting Chileans. The *arpillera* stands as witness to their drive to overcome and thrive; these humble works of cloth celebrate their choice of life over hiding, desperation, and dismay.

Participation in *arpillera* workshops was a central component of finding agency for these women. The reclamation of “la vida” during those first 10 years of the military rule when all organized opposition was forbidden, was key.¹⁰ Under the protection of the Catholic Church, the Pro Paz Committee and later the Vicariate of Solidarity were organized to help the people of Chile.¹¹ This was the only organization in the country denouncing the human rights violations of the military regime. The Vicariate offered medical support for victims of torture, soup kitchens, unemployment groups, and craft workshops for women that were, at first, a source of emotional and social support when words could not be given to the horror experienced.¹² The Vicariate began with providing a place to meet and supplies. Later they were responsible for buying the completed works and selling them abroad. Over time, the *arpillera* workshops – growing to more than 200 across Santiago's shantytowns – became more than emotional support. *Arpillera* workshops were for many, the main source of economic support. The Vicariate arranged initially for the works to be smuggled out of the country to NGO's and Chilean exiles.¹³ Sold in Europe, Canada, and the United States, the money raised was returned to Chile. Beyond economic support for the *arpilleristas*, the funds further supported the political resistance on the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jacqueline Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship: Making and Exporting Arpilleras Under Pinochet* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003).

⁷ Kelly Boldt & Timothy White, “Chilean Women and Democratization: Entering Politics through Resistance as Arpilleras”, *Asian Journal of Latin American Studies* (2011), 29-32.

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Ibid, 35

¹⁰ Arpilleras, Colección del Museo de Las Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos (Santiago, Chile: OchoLibros, 2012), 114.

¹¹ Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship*, 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 12.

ground in Chile but most importantly brought to light what was happening in Chile and added to the political pressure that eventually led to the demise of Pinochet.

Knowing what led to the creation of the *arpilleras*, I wish to now turn our focus to hallmarks of the works themselves – including the way they are constructed and characteristic imagery within the compositions.

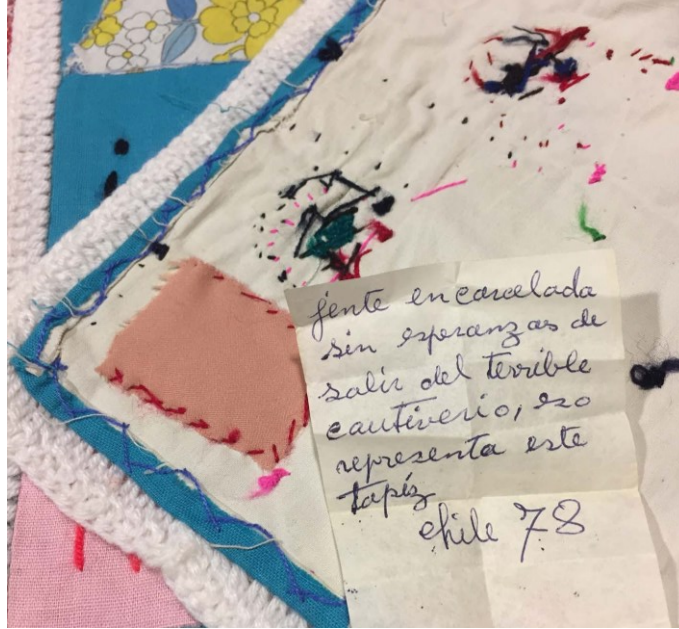
Construction

Through examples of the works one can gain a holistic appreciation for them, their makers, and the stories they write. Very early *arpilleras* demonstrated the use of numerous small scraps of cloth that often were taken from clothing left behind or worn out and had flat figures and forms applied using straight stitch. For obvious safety reasons creators did not sign their works.



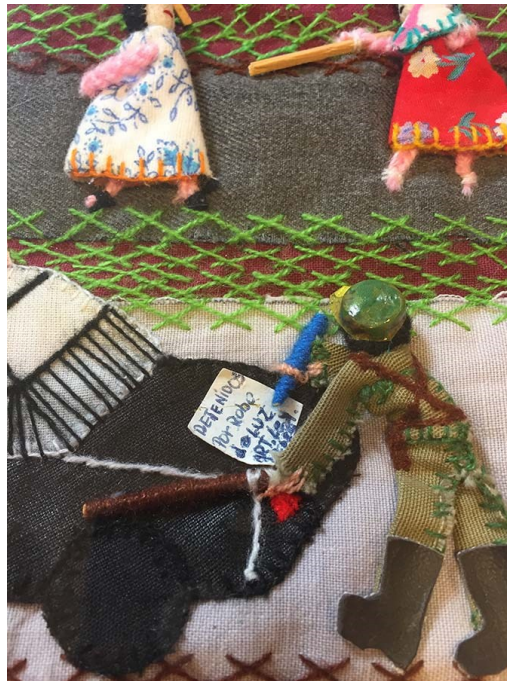
*Even if they cut freedom, we will move ahead. 000001, B. Brikkmann collection
©Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile*

At times, messages chronicling the human rights violations or pleas for solidarity were tucked into tiny pockets sewn onto the rear of the wall hangings.



Photograph detailing a hidden pocket on the rear of an arpillera with the note that was tucked inside. Courtesy of the author

Arpilleristas ingeniously incorporated the detritus of their lives through inclusion of bits of plastic pill casings as bowls, matchsticks to serve as broom handles, and pieces of tin to represent pots and pans.



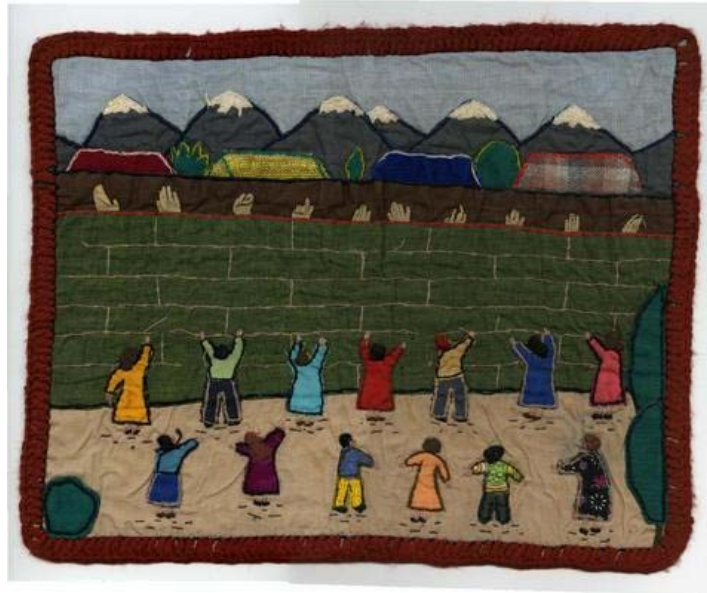
Detail of arpillera showing the incorporation of scraps of paper, matchsticks wrapped in yarn, and a pill casing as a military officer's helmet. Photograph courtesy of the author.

As the years passed and the construction of the cloth works continued, the skills and technical prowess of the *arpilleristas* grew. The backgrounds are now comprised of larger swathes of

cloth. We see more complex integration of embroidery. Three-dimensional figures now reflect the individuality of the persons on whom they are modeled while the scale and relationships of forms within the composition becomes more eloquent and elaborate.

Imagery

In terms of imagery, the landscape of Chile is a main setting of the *arpillera*. As the triangular bits of cloth sweep across the horizon we see the reflection of the glorious Andes in various states and seasons. Many *arpilleristas* incorporated the sun as a symbol of hope. The works of art, like many primary source photographs of the time, chronicle the lives of those subjected to the military junta. These include compositions such as waiting in line for limited food supplies or lunch in the communal kitchens where village children were fed from large soup pots because their families could not afford to feed them. In other images, women chain themselves to the fence outside detention facilities in which their loved ones are wrongly imprisoned, or protest in front of La Moneda – the seat of power in Santiago, holding signs on which photos of their loved ones can be seen coupled with the saying “Donde Estan?” (Where are they?).



*Detention Center, 000025; G. Jacques Collection,
©Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile*

Some compositions depict persons being questioned and/or stopped by military police, bags of bodies being dropped from helicopters in the Atacama desert, or bones discovered in the ovens at Longuen. In later years of the regime, the imagery shifts to include more acts of daily life but even these show the strain of economic and political oppression such as the need to get water from a pump since water supplies to homes were costly or images in which power lines are being diverted to houses as the poor steal electricity.



Cutting off the lights, 000003; M. Dieter collection
 ©Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago, Chile

The varied and complex stories told in the works are too numerous to note fully in this short presentation. And like any work of art seen in person, they are transformative. Most of us encounter them in books or articles. And they are beautiful and powerful. Yet, having a chance to return to Santiago, Chile this spring and spend more than two weeks in the archives of the Museo de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos (The Museum of Memory and Human Rights) collection, I assure you - the real thing far exceeds any images. With each *arpillera*, I found myself more enamored and awed at the skill of these artists than I imagined possible. As I flipped through stacks of these textile works, I would chuckle, or gasp, or find tears in my eyes as the presence of each *arpillerista's* distinctive hand could be seen and felt. The stories depicted on the surfaces are embedded within the fibers of the works – layered and stitched - thread by thread as these women created new lives from the scraps of their old.

Empowerment

By telling their stories visually these women transcended language, economics, and geography. The act of crafting these testimonial works, of wielding thread and scraps of cloth, became for them, a way to reclaim power. Beyond serving as testimonial record, the artworks speak to the need of traumatized people to document and preserve their history, to grieve, to heal and move forward. And they speak to the value of women's work and voices within archives that are often predominantly reflective of the male gaze or experience. This is true not just in the finished works but in the oral history that accompanies them. Stories of working by candlelight at night behind heavily draped windows to avoid discovery, hiding the *arpilleras* in the lining of bedspreads in case the police raided their homes, or secreting them into coats and skirts to carrying them to the Vicariate. Undoubtedly, the sale of the works provided financial empowerment for the *arpilleristas*.¹⁴ But perhaps even more important than their dissemination and sale, the act of making became a space of mobilization, fellowship, and empowerment.

¹⁴ Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship*, 142.

Sitting together, stitching and creating with their sisters, the *arpilleristas* talked – for some, for the first time about their identities as women. They honored their loved ones, shared their fears and hopes, and learned from one another. They became more aware of the power structures governing Chile, attended lectures informing them of their rights and for many, became empowered to move their resistance from the personal to the communal – through protesting openly in marches, demonstrations, and hunger strikes.¹⁵ This increased participation in Chilean politics is seen by many political scientists as clearly tied to the 2006 election of Michelle Bachelet - the first female, agnostic, separated and Socialist President of Chile.¹⁶ While her election as president whose election does not suggest patriarchal attitudes have disappeared, it does support links to the ways in which traditional gendered images of women in Chilean society have shifted.

Contemporary *Arpilleras*

Today, visitors and tourists to Chile find two distinct versions of the *arpilleras*. Those created in response to political oppression and standing as a material visual culture record of the atrocities in Chile which are visible in memorial sites and museums and those sold for commercial purposes.



Photograph of a memorial *arpillera* honoring Fr. Andre Jarlan. Courtesy of the author.

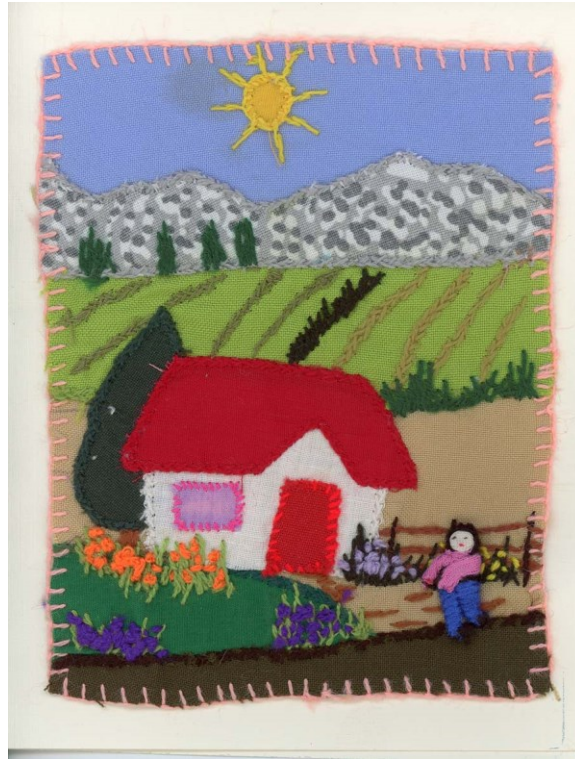
Memorial *arpilleras*, like those found in the home of Fr. Andre Jarlan – a French priest living in La Victoria, one of the poorest poblaciones on the outskirts of Santiago are treated with respect and reverence.¹⁷ Fr. Jarlan was sitting at his desk in his small second floor room when stray bullets from the military police easily pierced the flimsy tarpaper covering of the humble abode immediately killing him. Fr. Jarlan became a visible martyr, symbolizing the senseless and random violence of the junta. Other *arpilleras* can be found in state created museums and galleries like The Museum of Memory and Human Rights which was founded in January 2010

¹⁵ Boldt & White, “Chilean Women,” 30.

¹⁶ Ibid, 39.

¹⁷ Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship*, vii.

by then president Michelle Bachelet. This important and rich educational setting tells the story of the oppression of Chile, honors the numerous victims of the military junta and houses the largest collection of *arpilleras* in the world. More than 500 *arpilleras* have been repatriated to Chile to form the collection – they stand as a witness to the power of women and voice tremendous hope in the face of devastating adversity.



Arpillera card, purchased at the Fundación Artesanía de Chile in 2016. Courtesy of the author

But the predominant type of *arpillera* seen in modern-day Santiago and other environs of Chile are images of women feeding geese, rural farms, or alpaca standing on a hillside. They can be found on cards, coin purses, and bibs, sold in outdoor street markets and through gift shops like the Fundación Artesanía de Chile. This private non-profit supported by the state has an admirable goal – “to preserve the Chilean cultural identity and create opportunities for cultural and economic development for traditional artisans.”¹⁸ These stores – located in downtown Santiago’s main shopping district and the airport among other locations, were beautifully designed to make tourists and visitors aware of the range of traditional and indigenous artesanías – including Mapuche Weavings, hand-tooled copper items that celebrate Chile’s main mineral export, and Pomaire ceramic work distinctive for its black burnished surfaces. But for the *arpilleristas*, the *arpilleras* sold in these stores and those found in other street markets around the city, become an act of erasure. They replicate the Chilean state imposed “forgetting” of the

¹⁸ “Mission of Fundación Artesanía de Chile,” accessed August, 13, 2018, <http://artesaniasdechile.cl>

Rettig report (1991) and the Valech report (2004). These were the reports that resulted from two truth commissions into the human rights violations of the military regime. In these reports, families of the disappeared continued to feel silenced as the military blocked justice by keeping the fate of victims silent and ending investigation into the perpetrators of torture.¹⁹

Contemporary *arpilleras*, like the silence of these reports, marginalize the deep ties of the medium to the oppression of Chilenos and the political power of women.



Arpillera change purse; purchased at a street market in Santiago, 2018. Courtesy of the author.

Sadly, the current *arpilleras* no longer memorialize cultural and social traditions but obliterate them into a one-note depiction of Chilean life. In their sugary sweet, clean and commercial nature they commodify a perspective of Chilean life that is both untrue and idealized. These simplified images privilege consumption over truth and suggest a Chile that has not grown and transformed – both politically, culturally and economically into the rich and expressive land that sits pressed between the Pacific and the Andes. They suggest a stereotypical version of the very complex and diverse Chile – a country whose geography spans more than 2500 miles in length with hot deserts, tropical forests, and cold mountainous steppes and diverse peoples. While the *arpilleras* with which many are most familiar originated from a horrific truth, the rose above that pain to depict a diversity and complexity that is both honest and sincere. Unlike them, these sterile and cookie-cutter current *arpilleras* have become a symbolic annihilation of Chile.

¹⁹ Adams, *Art Against Dictatorship*, 25.

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