

Folklore as the Avant-Garde? Experimental Images of “the popular” in mid-century Chile

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the work of two mid-century Chilean artists—the documentarian Sergio Bravo (1927-), and the photographer Antonio Quintana (1904-1972)—, and the form by which they use different technological media in order to capture and construct popular subjectivities. Instead of conceiving “the popular” as an archaic and traditionalistic label, both artists open new possibilities to incorporate popular subjectivities into discourses of political and artistic modernization using formal experimentation and radical aesthetics. The works of Bravo and Quintana are not only capturing a form of popular practice (they are not restricted to be ethnographic documentations), but also creating or imagining a notion of a popular subjectivity defined by hard work, effort, creativity, and eventually, the capacity to carry out a radical transformation of society. This process of “imagining” popular subjectivity coincides with the political project of claiming the worth and complexity of popular classes, which historically had been neglected by dominant discourses of Chilean culture.

Keywords: Chile, experimentalism, folklore, popular subjectivities, photography, documentary cinema

Throughout the twentieth-century in Latin America, folklore has fascinated urban and middle-class audiences. From different ideological positions, urban groups have seen folkloric artifacts as symbols of the people, as “authentic” expressions of a national identity. The purpose of this work is to study two cases that can illuminate our understanding of how the appreciation of folklore (or popular culture) changed in mid-century Chile, and passed to occupy a central position in revolutionary politics and in experimental art. By its contact with new media and technologies, folklore also gained new audiences and social functions. In order to study these transformations, it is necessary to problematize the notion that folklore refers necessarily to archaic and traditional art forms, disconnected from modern aesthetics. In this article, I analyze the work of two mid-century Chilean artists—the documentarian Sergio Bravo (1927-), and the photographer Antonio Quintana (1904-1972)—, and the form by which they use different technological media in order to capture and construct popular subjectivities. Instead of conceiving “the popular” as an archaic and traditionalistic label, both artists open new possibilities to incorporate popular subjectivities into discourses of political and artistic modernization using formal experimentation and radical aesthetics.

One hypothesis central to this work argues that the works of Bravo and Quintana are not only capturing a specific popular practice (they are not restricted to be ethnographic documentations), but also creating or imagining a notion of a popular subjectivity defined by hard work, effort, creativity, and eventually, the capacity to carry out a radical transformation of society. This process of “imagining” popular subjectivity coincides with the political project of claiming the worth and complexity of popular classes, which historically had been neglected by dominant discourses of Chilean culture. One of the means by which Quintana and Bravo are trying to achieve this goal is by portraying the work of these popular subjects through a modern and even experimental aesthetic. Instead of assuming distant ethnographic perspectives, Quintana’s photography and Bravo’s documentaries engage in a sensorial and affective relation with the subjects portrayed. The film scholar Catherine Russell has coined the term “experimental ethnography” to refer to media practices that aim to dismantle the objectivity of traditional ethnography, and thus challenging the power dynamics that define conventional ethnographic discourse: “Experimental ethnography involves, above all, dismantling the Universalist impulse of realist aesthetics into a clash of voices, cultures, bodies, and languages” (Russell xvii). In the work of Quintana and Bravo, we see an attempt to bring value into popular forms of creation, but also to scrutinize conventional and paternalistic approaches to popular culture, thus engaging in practices of experimental ethnography. Although there is an evident ethnographic component in their works, it would be impossible to ignore all the formal and ideological

elements that do not align with the conventions of ethnographic discourse, rooted in scientific objectivity and in a relatively established distinction between the observer and the observed.

By avant-garde aesthetics, I mean the artistic practices that, since the 1920s, were radically criticizing and dismantling the Western artistic tradition. By aligning with radical politics, the avant-gardes intended to shatter the bourgeois institution of art (Bürger), and were determined to create new forms and unexpected languages that contradicted conventional notions of artistic beauty. Although the first expressions of the avant-gardes came from Europe, Latin American artists and writers reinvented these tendencies and adapted this urge of renovation into the social landscape of the continent, generating pieces that were directly challenging social structures and artistic values. In a moment of radical transformation, due to the process of modernization throughout the region, intellectuals and artists tried to generate forms of representation that could capture this new sensorial experience of modernity. Although the term “historical avant-garde” refers mainly to the artistic movements of 1920s and 1930s, I argue that both Bravo and Quintana were aligned with the main artistic and political goals of the avant-gardes, in the sense that they explored new languages, challenged aesthetic conventions, and carried out a revolutionary political agenda. I also find more productive to understand the avant-garde as a long-lasting process in our cultural history, rather than a period with a specific beginning and an end; as Jaime Concha argues,

Debido a que la vanguardia y el vanguardismo implican por sí mismos un gigantesco proceso de transformación cultural, que ha repercutido fuertemente en el imaginario histórico y cotidiano de este siglo, sus límites resultan fluctuantes, todo ángulo se revela insatisfactorio, pues el enfoque deja siempre algo en la sombra, mucho en el trasfondo. . . . Toda categoría general, demasiado abstracta, muestra aquí de inmediato su precariedad, su falibilidad heurística. (11)

Thus, as I intend to demonstrate in this work, we can consider Bravo and Quintana as examples of the extended period in which avant-gardist principles strongly influenced Latin American cultural production.

Even though the avant-gardes tend to be associated with the urban landscape, in Latin America the experimental aesthetics of the avant-gardes also were connected to the rural and popular cultures, as critics such as Alfredo Bosi and Jaime Concha have pointed out. Conventionally, popular cultural practices “are seen as lying outside the institutionalized and canonized forms of knowledge and aesthetic production generally defined as “high” culture” (Schelling 171). Regardless of this general assumption (that Schelling will later challenge), popular culture and high art have tended to

engage in a much more complex dialogue, giving space for hybrid and heterogeneous cultural artifacts that do not fit into rigid categories. Particularly in the Latin American context, the opposition between “traditional art” and experimentation is problematic, and it is necessary to pay attention to the points of contact between the two. As Néstor García Canclini has argued, the separation between experimental high-art, and traditional and popular artifacts is a hegemonic distinction made by the cultural elites in order to preserve their dominant position in the market of symbolic goods (43). Latin American avant-gardes, according to García Canclini, are facing the challenge of dismantling this contradictory distinction through their experimental language. Instead of transplanting European movements, the avant-gardes in Latin America had to deal with a much different cultural context, in which any mechanic copy would lack cultural density and relevance. García Canclini defines Latin American modernistic or avant-gardist aesthetics as a cultural expression that deals with contradictory historical temporalities that coexist in a given society, what the author refers to as the “*multitemporal heterogeneity* of modern culture” (47, emphasis in the original). Alfredo Bosi describes these tensions between opposite forces that defined Latin American modernity as a “mosaico de paradojas” (14). We will see in the work of Bravo and Quintana that said *multitemporal heterogeneity* is expressed by the tension between modern mechanical means of reproduction (technologies and dynamic aesthetics), and pre-modern, hand work-oriented subjects and practices. The avant-gardist aspects of each work emerge from this contradictory clash between two apparently opposed elements.

In the decade of 1960s and in the early 1970s, Chilean intellectuals, most of whom were actively engaged with radical politics, were putting “the popular” at the core of their agendas, and challenging conservative approaches to folklore culture. Quintana and Bravo occupied a central role in the inception of the long-lasting cultural and political project that led to Salvador Allende’s government between 1970 and 1973, a period in Chilean history when popular culture became the main concern of Chilean intellectuals. In order to trace the genealogy of this process, we need to go back to the period in which these two artists started their careers and analyze the dominant policies regarding popular culture during this time.

Frente Popular: from the modernizing State to the national-popular

A key event in mid-century Chilean political history is the formation of the coalition known as the *Frente Popular* (not to be confused with Salvador Allende’s *Unidad Popular*), which led to the presidency of Pedro Aguirre Cerda (1938-1941). Composed by parties from the center to the left, the coalition mobilized a relatively progressive political agenda of State modernization and reforms, strengthening

public institutions and encouraging a national culture of symbolic inclusion among historically marginalized sectors of Chilean society. Although the scholarship on Frente Popular tends to disagree on the degree in which the coalition was achieving its goals of inclusion, we can see an expansion on the forms by which the State is imagining and representing collective identities.¹

The leading groups of the Frente Popular belonged to an educated, urban, and relatively progressive middle class, and in many ways, this group was the social bedrock of Frente Popular governments. The coalition needed to articulate a project that would contest the hegemony of the oligarchy (nationalistic belonging to the collective, public institutions). In order to gain political support among the working class (peasants, miners, factory workers, etc.), the Frente Popular invested effort and time in forming national symbols of identification that would unite a diverse group into a relatively stable social formation. Although the nationalistic imaginary of belonging started to gain strength at the first decades of the Twentieth century:

En las primeras décadas del siglo, entre 1900 y 1930, asistimos, entonces, a un nuevo y activo proceso de construcción intelectual y simbólica de la nación, que se expresa a través de distintas prácticas discursivas . . . que desde distintos ángulos aspiran a regenerar el alma y el cuerpo del país, y que paralelamente, de modo implícito o explícito, van articulando una nueva imagen de la nación. (Subercaseaux 10)

This nationalistic imaginary permeated the entire political spectrum, as Bernardo Subercaseaux has argued.

Some of the main venues by which the Frente Popular's politicians expressed this political project were literary *criollismo* and an increasing interest in national folklore; both were shaping a regionalist imaginary focused on rural and traditional forms of living in order to define a collective identity in which different social groups could reconcile differences. Although the literary movement of *criollismo* has been largely scrutinized as an ideological projection of urban and bourgeois values into the rural space—an idealized and naïve representation of the *campo*—, these artistic discourses were invested in imagining identity formations that did not fit into the conservative oligarchic imaginary. The Historian Patrick Barr-Melej has argued that the literary movement was strongly tied to the nationalistic and reformist imaginary of the Frente Popular; he describes *criollismo* as “a literary form with a peculiar style but also as a collection of historical texts that disclose an agenda of cultural politics anchored by an emerging nationalist imagination” (10). The movement had evident flaws, but it did help in expanding the notion of Chilean culture by questioning dominant, exclusive, and urban-centered narratives of national identities. Like the emergence and institutionalization of *criollismo* as the

literary genre of the Frente Popular, during these years, the studies of Chilean folklore gained strength and institutional support. Some of the main scholars on Chilean folklore, like Tomás Lago or Oreste Plath, merged from this impulse of searching identity roots that were not present in urban cultural landscapes.²

Although in its origins the Frente Popular gathered a broad range of political parties and tendencies, the coalition lost power and ended after the death of Pedro Aguirre Cerda in 1941. Despite the dissolution of the coalition, the next two elected presidents belonged to the same party as Aguirre Cerda (Partido Radical), and many outlived the Frente Popular's political beliefs. Nevertheless, during the government of Gabriel González Videla (the third consecutive president belonging to the Partido Radical), the more progressive groups were violently forced to leave the coalition. Pushed by the U.S. government and the foreign mining companies, González Videla imposed a law banning the Communist Party: the infamous Ley de Defensa Permanente de la Democracia of 1948, also known as the *ley maldita*. With the exit of the Communist Party, most of the reformist initiatives that the State was pushing forward vanished, and Chilean politics experienced a sharp shift to the right that influenced the political landscape until the mid-sixties. Since 1948, the Communist Party—in exile, or under persecution—continued to work in forming a broad and inclusive cultural imaginary that would celebrate popular subjectivities, and locate them at the center of their political agenda. In order to celebrate these popular subjects, creations, and forms of living, the Communist Party used a nationalistic imaginary, but radically transformed by revolutionary components. This imaginary coincides with what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci calls “the national-popular:” a strategic alliance between progressive bourgeoisie and popular classes that aims to generate an inclusive and open revolutionary base in order to mobilize an emancipatory transformation of society. In this revolutionary articulation, the role of intellectuals and artists is highly relevant, in the sense that they have to create the social symbols of belonging that strengthen the alliance. Similarly, the discourses around Chilean culture and identity were changing and becoming a more inclusive platform from which to think critically on the historical marginalization of the working class. The intellectuals and artists affiliated with the Communist Party played a fundamental role in this expansion of national culture. Maybe the best example of this would be Pablo Neruda, but there are many other figures that have not received the visibility that they deserve, both for their emancipatory commitment to the working class and for their artistic innovation. This is the case of Antonio Quintana and Sergio Bravo. Both were Communists, but we can see in their work that their political sympathies did not

overshadow their artistic creativity. On the contrary, we see that political engagement reinforces the commitment to aesthetic originality.

One of the reasons for Bravo and Quintana's novelty in Chilean arts is their use of technological media. Technology allowed new and more efficient forms of compilation and circulation, but also new explorations in artistic language. Thus, technology permitted cultural expressions that were associated with traditional forms of life that were expressed in a novel, as well as experimental and even avant-gardist language. Both artists engaged in a critical dialogue with the possibilities that technological media (photography and cinema) opened up. Instead of just using these formats as a way to register and preserve popular practices, Bravo and Quintana made use of the experimental and innovative possibilities of these languages. Therefore, the popular subjectivities, practices, and aesthetics that these authors depicted were seen as innovative, even revolutionary acts of creativity. Some of the questions that arise from their uses of technologies are: what role did new technologies play in this cultural landscape? How practices of ethnographic compilation were transformed by the arrival of relative new media, such as photographic and filmic cameras. In order to address these and other questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at each artists' work.

Sergio Bravo's *Mimbre*: the experimental and sensorial image of popular creation

Film historians tend to agree on the centrality of Sergio Bravo in the development of Chilean cinema (Mouesca *El documental chileno* 65-72). Among many contributions to the development of Chilean cinema, he was the founder of the Centro de Cine Experimental of Universidad de Chile in 1957, which according to many critics is the institution responsible for the radical renovation of Chilean cinema. But Bravo's role as an innovative director is also crucial. Despite unanimous recognition, there are not enough studies on Bravo's aesthetic innovation and unique cinematic language (one exception to this is the recent book *La música del nuevo cine chileno*, by Claudio Guerrero and Alekos Vuskovic, that locate *Mimbre* at the center of the process of modernization of Chilean cinema).

By commenting on his documentary short *Mimbre* (1957), I argue that Bravo was not only producing a unique body of work, but also engaging in a highly experimental and bold dialogue with the possibilities of the medium, as well as carrying out a clever commentary on the complexities of popular forms of creation. *Mimbre* belongs to a series of documentaries—directed by Bravo between 1957 and 1962—that focus on popular culture from the Chilean countryside or urban margins: some titles being *Trilla* (1959), *Casamiento de Negros* (1959), *Día de Organillos* (1959), and *Láminas de Almahue* (1962). Guerrero and Vuskovic have recognized the radical experimentation of *Mimbre*: “es el más

radical, en lo que refiere a experimentación y renovación, de una serie de filmes que marcan el inicio de una nueva época del cine local” (33). Sergio Bravo has also recognized the importance of the avant-garde in his aesthetic formation; for instance, during his studies of Architecture in Universidad de Chile he was exposed to the modernist ideas of the German school *Bauhaus*, which had a great effect in Bravo (Guerrero and Vuskovic 41-42). This commitment with artistic renovation coincided with an environment of social and political change: as Bravo says in an interview about his years as a student, “En la Universidad se vivía un período de plena efervescencia por la Reforma, donde entraban todo tipo de iniciativas renovadoras y de tentativas de experimentación. Se planteaban todos los problemas de la estética arquitectónica; pero, además, estaban en cuestión todos los problemas ligados a la cultura chilena” (Mouesca “Variaciones sobre el cine” 103). Formal experimentation is not disconnected to the revolutionary goals of radically transforming Chilean society.

According to Guerrero y Viskovic, *Mimbre* is shot “con un ojo tan etnográfico como estético” (37). The documentary is in many ways departing from the conventions of ethnographic documentaries—such as the use of a neutral narrative voice that describe the events, or slow and controlled movements of the camera. Shot in the house-workshop of *artesano* Alfredo Manzano, *Mimbre* is a six-minute piece in which Bravo portraits Manzano’s work with *mimbre* (the Spanish word for wicker). The documentary has been described as “algo así como una declaración de principios cinematográficos” (Mouesca *El documental chileno* 67), or a cinematic (and political) statement of commitment with the valorization of popular culture, but without failing in ethnographic conventions, or “rebuscamientos folklorizantes” (Mouesca *El documental chileno* 67). Instead, the documentary depicts Manzano’s work from a poetic and at time abstract standpoint. Instead of explaining Manzano’s technique or providing information about his cultural background or context, the documentary shows images of Manzano at work, through a fragmentary and experimental use of the camera, and the incidental music played by Violeta Parra.³ By disarticulating a lineal narrative, the documentary moves away from ethnographic conventions. There is no narrative voice that explain or translate what we are seeing, pushing the audience to confront the visual material as directly as possible. However, while there is no voice to guide us, the camera assumes an explicitly active role during the six minutes of shooting.

The textual intervention at the beginning of the documentary includes little information, but this underlines how the documentary is much more focused on creating a sensorial narrative with which the audience can physically engage:

En la Quinta Normal, calle Abtao 275,

vive Alfredo Manzano, “Manzanito”
hijo de pescadores y virtuoso en
el arte de tejer MIMBRE
En este documental solo queremos
dar a conocer las impresiones visuales
que *sacuden al visitante* que llega
a su taller. (*Mimbres*, emphasis added)

The historical avant-gardes aimed to generate a shocking sense of discomfort, and were much more invested in challenging than in pleasing their audiences (Bürger 80-81). According to the previous quote, *Mimbres* aims to communicate the visual impressions that *shake* the person that witnesses Manzano’s work: this is the sort of responses that the avant-gardes aimed to evoke in their audiences. Thus, we can argue that from the beginning of the documentary Bravo is framing Manzano’s work in an avant-garde aesthetic. According to this, Manzano’s expertise in the art of *mimbres* would generate a sensorial response that challenges the conventions of the audience.

During the documentary, the images of Manzanito working can get abstract, blurry, and even uncomfortable to watch. At times, it is impossible to know what is happening, as we lose points of reference, and there is no narrative or descriptive voice to guide the spectator. The camera assumes an emancipated role in exploring different possibilities: at times it focuses on the agile hands of Manzano, in the shadows on a wall, in the sticks of *mimbres* waving, or in the figures and textures that Manzano skilfully creates. By employing close-ups, the audience is deprived of contextual information, thus generating a sensorial response that is not strictly referential. At different sections of the documentary, the camera explores experimental possibilities; for instance, in one moment, the camera shoots from inside one of the *mimbres* figures, and we only see lights and shadows, which triggers a more physical response in the spectator.

This highly dynamic form of portraying Manzano’s work generates an interesting counterpoint between the repetitive (almost mechanical) movements of the hand, the incidental music by Violeta Parra, the camera, and the operations of montage. It is as if the music, the action, and the camera were interdependent, and the different components of the documentary were inherently connected. Although they belong to extremely different realms, the camera and the hands are synchronized throughout the documentary. Thus, the “artisan” and the “avant-gardist” are working at the same level in the process of weaving together the elements that compound *Mimbres*; they both master a language and create something new with their hands, and the worth and novelty of the documentary cannot be

appreciated if we dismiss one of these two aspects. The specificity of cinematic language allows Bravo to make this connection visible. Bravo generates a unique piece of a highly sophisticated aesthetic, but that is also very raw and direct. This reminds of García Canclini's idea that Latin American avant-gardes are putting together two temporalities—cosmopolitan modernity and rural tradition—in a productive and innovative fashion.

By representing the work of Manzanito under an experimental lens, *Mimbre* not only subverts the conventions of folklorist ethnography and dismantles the distinction of popular culture and high culture, but also opens up the possibility for new forms of representing the popular. Thus, Bravo creates an aesthetically challenging and politically committed piece that forces the audience to view in a new light the popular practice of *mimbre*, and reevaluate the position that popular forms of creation have in Chilean culture. “The popular” is portrayed as a fluid, heterogeneous and dynamic entity, and the practice of *mimbre* metonymically represents the transformative force that popular action could bring into Chilean society.

Antonio Quintana's *Manos de Chile*: Intimate Portraits of the Collective

Antonio Quintana started his career as a photographer in the 1930s and worked actively until his death in 1972. In 1948, Quintana's trajectory shifted radically. Like many other Communists of his generation, his life was deeply affected by national politics, and he had to leave Chile during the government of Gabriel González Videla, due to the previously mentioned *ley maldita*. During his exile between 1946 and 1952, he lived in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. Once back in Chile, he taught photography at the Universidad de Chile and worked as a technical assistant in the Archivo Central de Fotografía y Cinematografía at the same institution.

In the mid-1930s, Quintana started working at the *Revista de Arte*, an academic publication of the Universidad de Chile that published scholarly articles on visual arts, music, folklore, among other genres, paying attention to expressions of popular culture such as pottery, textiles, and ceramics. In the pages of *Revista de Arte*, Quintana published photographs of artistic artifacts that accompanied academic articles. Even though the main function of these images was to illustrate the texts, we can already detect in these early photographs a sensitive attention to the aesthetic qualities of the medium, like the importance of composition and light contrast, among others. For instance, the article “Las cerámicas de los aborígenes de Chile” by Giuseppe Mazzini published in 1937 accompanies Quintana's photographs of pottery and ceramics. We can see in these images that Quintana developed an aesthetic language, through a very expressive use of light and contrast, which allows depicting the objects in

their materiality but also in relation to their contexts. He will continue taking photographs of traditional and popular artifacts until the mid-forties, and his photographs appeared in journals, brochures, and catalogues of museums and other cultural institutions of the time.

Among Quintana's work, the most known project is the collective exhibition *Rostro de Chile* of 1960. Although the director of the project was the photographer Roberto Montandón, Quintana was its main promoter. Supported by the Universidad de Chile, several photographers traveled across the country to gather a collective depiction of Chile's popular classes: miners, farmers, factory workers, fishermen, indigenous peoples, and other communities traditionally absent (or mistreated) in the official representations of national identity. The collective exhibition—composed of more than four-hundred images—opened in 1960 at Universidad de Chile's main campus, and later traveled to more than twenty countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The photographs were very diverse, and the exhibition intended to represent the country in its geographical complexity and human heterogeneity. In *Rostro de Chile* we see the social and politically engaged approach to photography that will define Quintana's work. Photography provided Quintana the technical means to capture, circulate, and validate inclusive notions of collective identity, and to challenge hegemonic visions of the nation. Aligned with his political engagement, Quintana used photography as a socially and historically grounded form of expression.

After the titanic effort of *Rostro de Chile*, Quintana started a project that continued the path opened by *Rostro*: the series known as *Manos de Chile*. *Manos* is greatly informed by his previous experience, in its technical components and in the treatment of the object depicted. *Manos de Chile* consisted of a large selection of photographs of Chilean hands: of factory workers, farmers, fishermen, miners, women, or children, in their daily lives, at their homes, or at work places. The series expressively highlights the deep effect that hard work has had on these subjects. Informed by his experience as a photographer of sculptures and artistic objects in *Revista de Arte*, the photographs of *Manos de Chile* are taken in such a way that they evoke solid and heavy sculptures shaped by a harsh life. The framing also highlights the materiality of these hands, in the sense that it is possible to see the textures of harshness; the close-up allows the viewer to distinguish calluses, wrinkles, thick veins, and wounds of a hard life. There is also another connection between his photos of sculptures and artifacts and his *manos*, and it has to do with the metonymic meaning that the hands acquire. Just like the folkloric pieces—tapestry, pottery, among others—, the hands are representing a community, a collective identity that goes beyond the singular individual whose hands we see in the picture.

Hands are peculiar things: they are anonymous and highly personal, the result of social conditions but at the same time radically impossible to repeat: there are no two hands alike. These images are then an individual and collective portrait at the same time: an image of the individual that makes him or her unique, but also that which makes them a part of a larger group. By depicting just the hands and not the whole body, Quintana is imposing an anonymity on the subject portrayed. However, it would be a mistake to interpret that as a sign of de-humanization; on the contrary, by picturing just the hands, the series gained a lot in aesthetic expressivity and the subjects portrayed become much more powerful symbols of the human condition. Thus, the photographs urge us to think on how these hands connect the individual (whose identity we ignore) and the collective. If we read the series in Quintana's trajectory and with his political commitment, we can argue that *Manos* aims to portray a social class, the Chilean *pueblo*. We don't know to whom these hands belong, but we do know that most of them are of working-class people. They actually are in many ways what define the working class: they have done the hard work; they have the experience.



Antonio Quintana Contreras. Retrato de manos, Ramal Central-Lagunas, Tarapacá. Ca. 1950. Archivo Central Andrés Bello, Universidad de Chile.

Despite representing the collective, there are pictures among the series that are much more focused on the individual or on intimate experiences, like the one that depicts a couple of elders tenderly holding hands, or the one that depicts an adult's hand holding that of a baby. Because hands are also a very intimate and sensitive part of the human body, and are strictly related to human affections and emotions. If Quintana was trying to make a dignifying portrait of the working people, it would not be enough to just show them at work, but also in their capacity of expressing love and intimacy.

There is a testimonial component in the photographs, in the sense that these hands have witnessed a life of hardship and adversity. We can recreate a life story just by seeing these rough-treated hands, and the audience must face a structure of radical inequalities that have defined Chilean history in order to fully understand the political significance of these photographs. However, Quintana's *Manos* are not victimizing but celebrating the strength, endurance, and creativity of Chilean *pueblo*. Most of the hands are depicted during a work-related activity—peasants working the soil, artisans knitting, fishermen fixing their nets—, which points out the capacity of transforming the world in which these hands operate. The hands can change themselves and change the world in which they inhabit, so the identity of these hands is not fixed and defined by strict social conditions, but a project of collective emancipation and an act of imagination into the future.

The aftermaths of Quintana's *manos*: the revolutionary hands of *Unidad Popular*

The political and aesthetical commitment of Quintana and Bravo responded to the main objective of transforming Chilean society. By celebrating popular culture and subjects and placing them at the center of the cultural project of the Chilean left, their work is an evident antecedent of Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular (1970-1973) and the cultural explosion that happened in Chile since the mid-sixties until the military Coup of 1973. Although there are explicit connections between Salvador Allende's government and the previous progressive governments in the country—particularly Pedro Aguirre Cerda's, in which Allende worked as Minister of Public Health—, the project that Allende's Unidad Popular was trying to implement was unique in its scopes and in the depth of the transformations to the Chilean social fabric.

This moment in Chilean history coincides with a very significant cultural and artistic renovation going on in several expressions, such as music, cinema, visual arts, and literature. Almost every artist invested in a renovation of Chilean culture was also supporting Allende's Unidad Popular. Among the several artistic expressions associated with the Socialist government, one specific symbol occupies a central position within the poetic imagination of Unidad Popular, and that is the symbol of the working hand, *la mano trabajadora*. We can see it in songs, pamphlets, murals, and posters, always articulating a message of hard work, unity and hope in the destiny of the Chilean people. Many iterations of the working hand are explicit quotes or references to Quintana, and we can see a direct continuity in the discursive and symbolic connotations that these hands acquire. Specifically, I would like to comment on two examples: one by singer Víctor Jara, and one by the group of *muralistas* called

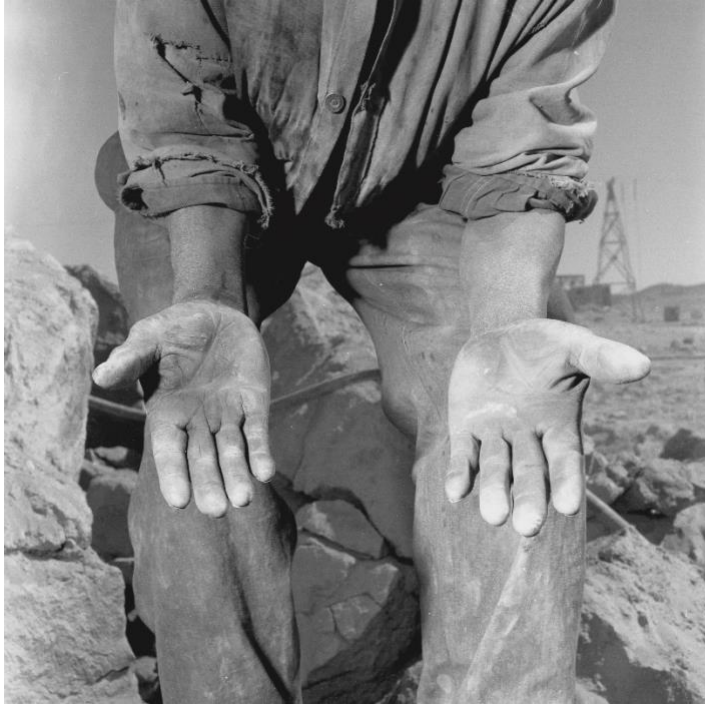
Brigadas Ramona Parra (BRP). Jara and the BRP belonged to the Communist Party, and played an active role during the presidential campaign of 1970, and during the government of Allende.

Víctor Jara might be the best example of the degree of political commitment that artists had with Unidad Popular. A year before the election of Allende, Jara published his album *Pongo en tus manos abiertas* (1969), produced by the record label Jota Jota, of the Juventudes Comunistas. Inspired by Quintana, the image on the cover shows two bare hands of a peasant, exposing his shriveled and ill-treated skin. These open hands generate a sense of reciprocity and community between the audience and the anonymous subject, in the sense that we are seeing an intimate and very personal part of his body. Likewise, the gesture of openness also promotes empathy with the suffering of these wounded hands.



Pongo en tus manos abiertas cover (1969). Photograph by Mario Guillard. Fundación Víctor Jara.

The cover was inspired by a photograph by Quintana that depicts the hands of a miner in the Northern-Chile pampa. The photograph is called “Manos de trabajador pampino,” and is one of the most iconic in Quintana’s series:



Antonio Quitana Contreras. *Manos de minero*, Oficina Salitrera Victoria, Iquique. Ca. 1950. Archivo Central Andrés Bello, Universidad de Chile.

Although the photographs are very similar, on Jara's cover we see that the framing is different, leaving much of the context out and focusing just on the details of the hand: the wrinkles, the sores, the calluses, the dirt. This generates a greater sense of intimacy, since the audience are physically closer to the worker, almost like in a private conversation. It also allows us to get a more detailed sense of the experiences of harshness that these hands have witnessed.

The metaphor of the hands appears in many of Jara's compositions: for instance, the song "A Luis Emilio Recabarren," from whose lyrics the title of the album is taken:

Pongo en tus manos abiertas
mi guitarra de cantor
martillo de los mineros
arado del labrador
Recabarren, Luis Emilio Recabarren
Simplemente, doy las gracias por tu luz

The song is dedicated to the founder of the Communist Party Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876-1924), a key figure in working class organizations in Chile. The song celebrates and makes an homage to Recabarren's life, and underlines the relevance of his legacy, through the image of his open hands.

Recabarren's open hands are a clear reference to the hands of the cover: Recabarren and the worker of the cover are symbolically the same.

Many other songs of Jara's repertoire use the image of the hand, such as "Plegaria a un labrador," "Lo único que tengo," or "El Lazo", all of them are both a celebration of popular creativity and a demand for social justice. Joan Turner, Jara's widow, wrote about the image of the hands in his music, that were not just a reference to the Chilean working class, but a celebration of the popular struggle and the capacity of the people to create beauty. Jara felt an intense connection with the expressions of Chilean folklore, and had a particular affection for folklore artifacts. Says Turner: "Sus únicos bienes preciosos, fuera de su guitarra, eran objetos fabricados por las manos del pueblo que él amaba y cuyos sufrimientos y dolores eran los suyos" (178). He understood these objects to be the ultimate manifestation of a collective and popular creativity, and the material expression of the suffering and hopes of the people.

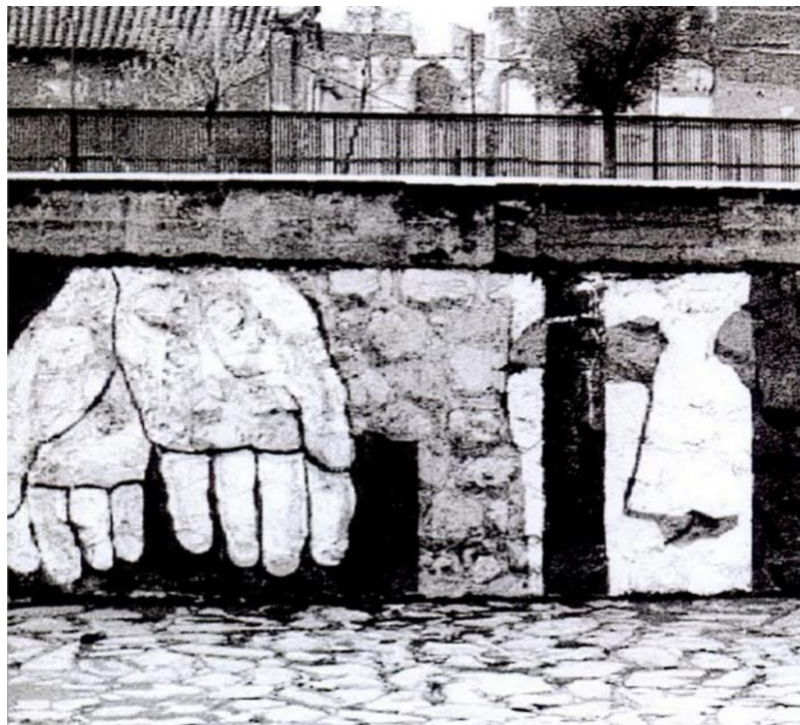
Another form of art deeply engaged with Unidad Popular that was reimagining Quintana's work is Brigadas Ramona Parra: a collective of muralist painters that played a key role during the campaign of 1970, and then during Allende's presidency. Their role was to communicate through murals the political message of Allende's coalition, using a simple and effective visual language. In order to do so, the *brigadas* had to create a specific vocabulary to condensate several meanings in one or two figures. The Historian Camilo Trumper has studied extensively the group, and its effort to create an artistic expression that was functional, contextual, and strictly grounded in local politics without losing creativity. Initially, these murals were invested in creating a sense of collective belonging among Chilean citizens that could vote for Allende: their slogans "imagined a single citizenry, a coherent "we" they could move to vote" (Trumper 97). After the elections, the group gained more institutional support and the members were able to generate a more complex vocabulary. In a conversation with Trumper, Alejandro "Mono" González, one of the more active members of the BRP, says:

"There is no benefit to complicated images," González believes. "We have to work quickly. We are not artists. We could not be drawing human forms, telling complicated stories." Rather, the murals they painted in these areas could be grasped at once. "There are only two or three ideas," he continues. "There is a hand and a face, a fist, which has to do with struggle, an open hand, which has to do with generosity and commitment. . . . There are only two or three elements. The flag . . . has to do with

nation, with identity, with struggle, with human relations. . . . The themes are simple.”
(in Trumper 104)

In this functional vocabulary, the hand is always present, like the quote demonstrates.

The BRP painted one mural in 1972 in the Mapocho river walls in downtown Santiago.



Mural in Santiago, Brigada Ramona Parra (1972). Photograph by Fernando Orellana. Courtesy of Eduardo Castillo Espinoza.

The open hands that we see here are a clear reference to Jara’s *Pongo en tus manos abiertas*, and to Quintana’s photograph as well. What is relevant in these connections is that we can see how one specific image can be reimagined and re-contextualized, thus adding new meanings by confronting the piece with different audiences. As Mono González says in the previous interview, they were using a vocabulary that was already familiar with the people that would see the murals. These open hands were part of the social repertoire of political images that were aiming to transform Chilean society. By tracing this itinerary (Quintana to Jara to BRP), it is possible to witness the endurance and persistence that certain images have, and how they can gain in complexity and in social efficacy as they are exposed to different environments of reception.

Conclusions

The ideologies from which “the popular” was being imagined changed drastically in just a few decades in Chile and Latin America. The revolutionary movements from the sixties and seventies radicalized how popular cultures were conceived and interpreted in the continent. The work of Sergio Bravo with documentary cinema, and Antonio Quintana with photography provide an excellent case if we want to analyze how these transformations were not just political, but also deeply affected artistic discourses of the time. What I have called “folklore as the avant-garde” refers to these transformations in the way by which artists and intellectuals were representing popular subjectivities from an aesthetically-challenging and experimental standpoint, and thus generating a notion of the popular subjects as emancipatory forces that would lead radical transformations in Latin American societies.

Instead of perceiving the work of Quintana and Bravo as a preservation of traditional practices, I argue that they assumed a mobile positionality, from which they modified the cultural status of Chilean folkloric expression. That is the main reason why these authors are not replicating the conventions of ethnography. These pieces are contradictory and complex, not only in the sense that are putting together heterogeneous temporalities into one single artistic object, but also because their aesthetic discourse is both raw and sophisticated, quotidian and exceptional, intimate and collective. By acknowledging this clash of different forces in the documentary of Bravo and the photographs by Quintana, we can identify a departure from traditionalistic and conservative approaches to folklore. Technological means of representation allow these authors to put together aspects of Chilean culture that were stranger to each other. Then, it is necessary to underline the importance of cinema and photography in this particular moment, and how these media lead to flexible approaches to cultural identity, in the unequal and fragmented society of mid-century Chile. Antonio Quintana and Sergio Bravo creatively explored these possibilities in works that are politically progressive and aesthetically challenging. It is our duty to pay attention to the complexities of said works, and how they imagined the apparent paradox of the folklore as the avant-garde.

Notes

¹ For example, María Angélica Illanes argues that thanks to the action of the Frente Popular, the State became much more inclusive and diverse. On the contrary, Gabriel Salazar argues that the Frente Popular was an elitist political formation that left no room for popular participation.

² For a study of the policies that fomented Folklore education during the Radical government of Pedro Aguirre Cerda (1938-1941), see Barr-Melej, 207-210.

³ For a detailed discussion on the role of music in the documentary, see Guerrero and Vuskovic.

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