



Resilience, Resistance & Solidarity

Crafting Resistance: The art of Chilean political prisoners

An exhibition co-curated by Jasmine Gideon, Birkbeck, University of London and Gloria Miqueles, Chilean Ex-political prisoner.

What's in the image...



- Mural in 3 & 4 Alamos – one of the concentration camps of Pinochet's dictatorship, today a detention centre for young offenders. By muralist Ian Pierce (Ekeko).
- The main objective of this mural is to remember the use of this place during the dictatorship and as an integral part of a current campaign to transform it into a place of memory.
- In the mural you see four windows (fictitious) in the upper part of the wall. The windows have bars but between the bars are the hands of prisoners who are doing with needle and thread a large embroidery, The focus of the mural is placed on the hands and embroidery seen as an act of solidarity, hope, but also of resistance and denouncement.

Concentration camps and torture centres in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship



3 & 4 Alamos



Villa Grimaldi



Londres 38

- Approximately 1170 places throughout the country
- 7 different categories/groups:
 - Concentrations camps
 - Clandestine centres for detention and torture
 - Places used as detention and torture centres:
 - Civic buildings
 - Military units
 - Investigative police units
 - Police units
 - Prisons



These places were established for the sole purpose of carrying out, in a systematic manner and with total impunity, the crimes of State terrorism, political persecution, torture, kidnapping, homicide, enforced disappearance and illegal burial, among other crimes

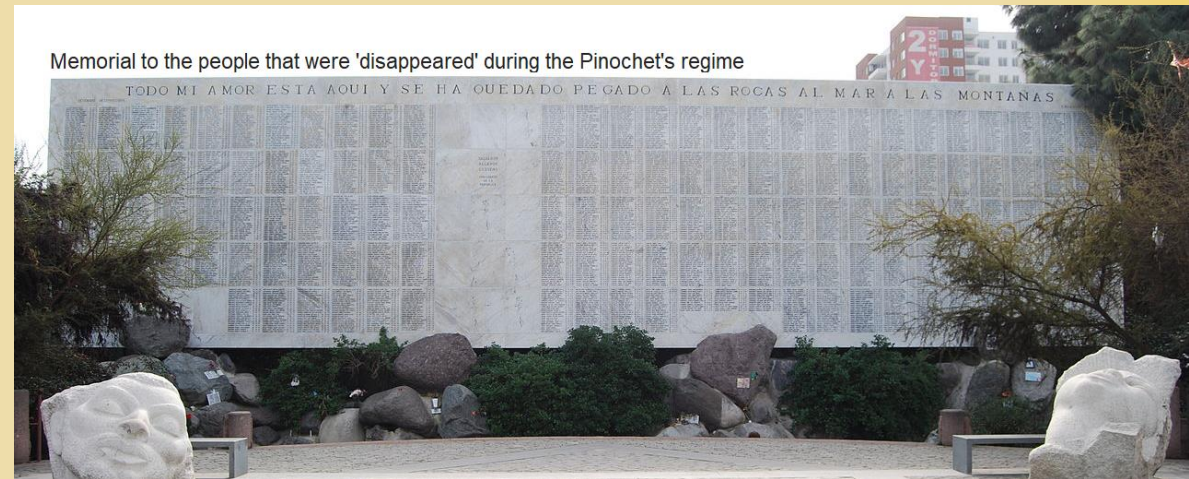
In numbers: Human rights violations in Pinochet's Chile

According to the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (Rettig Commission) and the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Valech Commission):

- The number of direct victims of human rights violations in Chile accounts for around **30,000** people:
- **27,255** tortured and
- **2,279** executed.

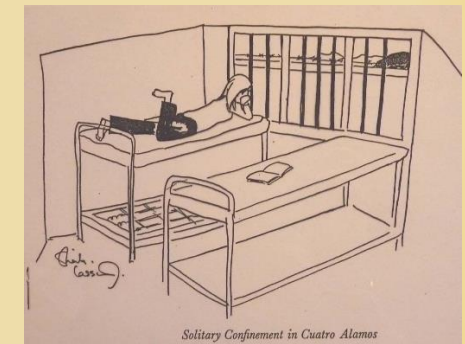
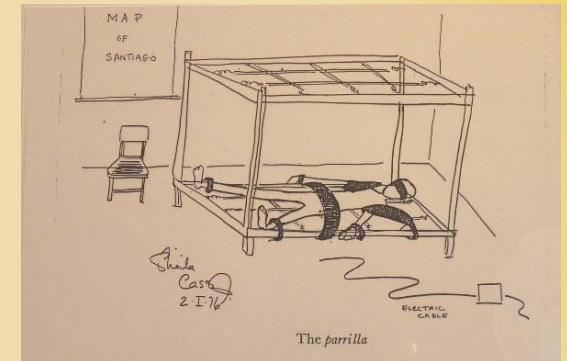
In addition,

- some **200,000** people suffered exile and
- A large but **unknown** number went through clandestine centres and were illegally detained.

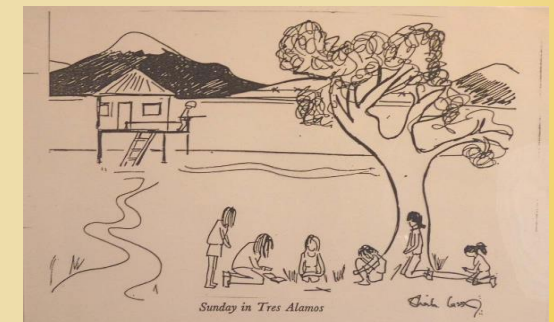


Resilience in a journey of horror

- **Clandestine Centres of Torture** - Immediately after the arrest the person was taken to one of the clandestine centres (such as Villa Grimaldi, Londres 38 or the Venda Sexy). *'What happened [there] is so incredible and so appalling that it is difficult for people without knowledge of interrogations methods ..to believe'* (Sheila Cassidy, English doctor who gave medical care to a political opponent of Pinochet. As a result, she was herself arrested and severely tortured)
- **Solitary Confinement - 4 Alamos:** Having gone through the torture, hundreds of political prisoners were moved to 4 Alamos - a centre where prisoners were in transit, still not recognised as prisoners. The main purpose was to allow prisoners to recover from the tortures inflicted and if lucky they would be moved to 3 Alamos.
- **Concentration Camp: Tres Alamos** was a camp where detainees became political prisoners and were recognized by the dictatorship as such. They had a prison regime, but they had visits twice a week from their family and friends.



Solitary Confinement in Cuatro Alamos

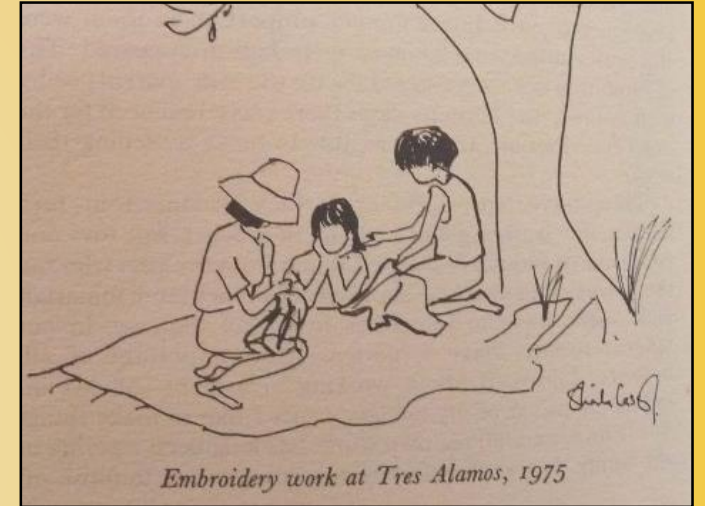


Sunday in Tres Alamos

Resistance and Solidarity

Once in this less restrictive environment, after a nightmare journey, political prisoners started to organise...

- ▶ One of the most notable ways - the handicraft **workshops** carried out by prisoners.
- ▶ 80 types of object using all sort of materials and techniques and tools have been identified– examples in this exhibition
- ▶ These workshops constituted real acts of resistance against the dictatorship because they served as a space of resilience, resistance and solidarity. The artworks also provided the possibility of generating economic resources for the prisoners' families.
- ▶ **But above all it was a way of not surrendering to the cruelty of the regime and its henchmen.**



First objects...

- **Bread-crumbs bead necklace:** Despite hunger being part of the experience, political prisoners would leave a little crumb to use to do something with their hands and turn it into a beautiful object such as this necklace. This belongs to Sara De Witt and was made in 4 Alamos by a Chilean resident in Lebanon, who travelled to Chile to collect traditional clothing and jewellery for her impending wedding. She *“was detained by the Dina and interrogated by personnel of the Embassy of Israel in Chile (Sara de Witt)”*
- **Seahorse:** It is a small figure carved in wood, bone or metal. It represents the figure in most of the sewer grates in the floors, the only thing that blindfolded prisoners could see when they had the possibility of going to the bathroom. The first horse was made practically without tools, everything was improvised. For example a (BIC) pen with a razor blade at one end was used as a chisel. *(Reinaldo Salgado, Hernando Fernandez-Canque)*



Round bread-crumb bead necklace

- In the precariousness of the political prison, when hunger was part of the experience, a dilemma arose between eating all the scarce bread or leaving a little crumb to use to craft something beautiful, the completion of which provided some happiness.
- This necklace belongs to Sara De Witt and was made in 4 Alamos (solitary confinement) by MLJ, a Chilean, resident in Lebanon, who travelled to Chile to collect traditional clothing and jewellery to use in her impending wedding. *“MLJ was detained by the Dina and interrogated by personnel of the Embassy of Israel in Chile (SdeW)”*



The Seahorse

- It is a small figure carved in wood, bone or metal.
- The horse achieves special meaning. It represents the figure in most of the sewer grates on the floors and was the only thing that the blindfolded prisoners could see when they had the possibility of going to the bathroom.
- The first horse was made practically without tools, everything was improvised. For example a (BIC) pen with a razor blade at one end was used as a chisel.
- The crafting of the horses was organised in a chain of production. Some of them were rough, others very polished.



(Reinaldo Salgado, Hernando Fernandez-Canque)

Blouse embroidery

“The women undertook different roles. Some created designs, others cut the garments, others did the sewing. I was one of those who embroidered the blouses.

“The blouses were sold abroad, mostly in Europe, via different organisations of solidarity with the Chilean people. The income was distributed according to need.”

...

“To me this blouse represents solidarity. Solidarity among us women who had been detained because of our political beliefs and the solidarity shown by peoples of the world to the suffering Chilean people under the military dictatorship.”

(Cristina Zamora)



Carving

Santiago Bell expressed his joys and sorrows through his art, particularly through sculptures in wood.

The moment that he found himself in the prison compound, Santiago started carving pieces of wood. He used the only tool available to him, the sharpened back of his metal tea-spoon.

Pedro – a fellow political prisoner- asked Santiago if he would teach him to sculpt.

They did not manage to finish the sculpture...

20 years later, Pedro arrived unannounced at Santiago's home, back in Chile, with the sculpture that they had started in prison all those years ago and said "*.....perhaps you can finish it..*" .Santiago "*..there is nothing more that we can add..*"

(Santiago Bell's family)

Unfinished Christ



Negro Jose (doll)

A knitted wool doll created by prisoners of 3 Alamos inspired by the song of the same name by the group **Illapu**.

The song was sung by political prisoners when detainees in Cuatro Alamos -solitary confinement - were moved out to 3 Alamos, or when prisoners were released.

This small doll became the favourite present to be given to fellow prisoners.



In a forgotten town i don't know why,
Its traditional dance makes him move,
In the town they called him Negro Jose,
My friend Negro Jose.

Forgive me if I call you Negro Jose,
You're a devil but a friend Negro Jose,
You will be with me in the future Negro Jose,
I tell you because I know, my friend Negro Jose.
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nt2_oZoRyJA)



Pendants, necklaces and earrings

- ▶ The metal pendants were made with old coins that political prisoners' families started to bring them. They had to learn to remove the engraved images on both sides of the coins and then design and shape the new images using the technique of engraving on metal.
- ▶ There are some pendants that are very similar, which shows that they were made with a kind of template. There are some very elaborate designs which helped to highlight new ideas. There depict political issues, resistance or denunciation of their situation. Other materials used in pendants, necklaces and ear-rings include wood and soup bones. The latter were from their meals in the first days in prison. The same material were used through the country in all the prisons.



Other objects...

Cardigan knitted by Beatriz Miranda in 1975 whilst detained in 3 Alamos camp. "The only item I have ever knitted, with lots of advice from women prisoners and using natural wool - "Lana virgen".



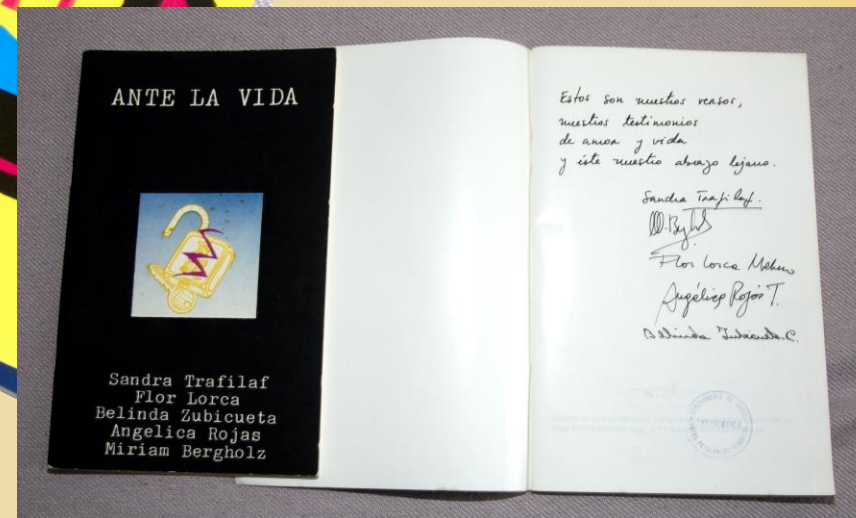
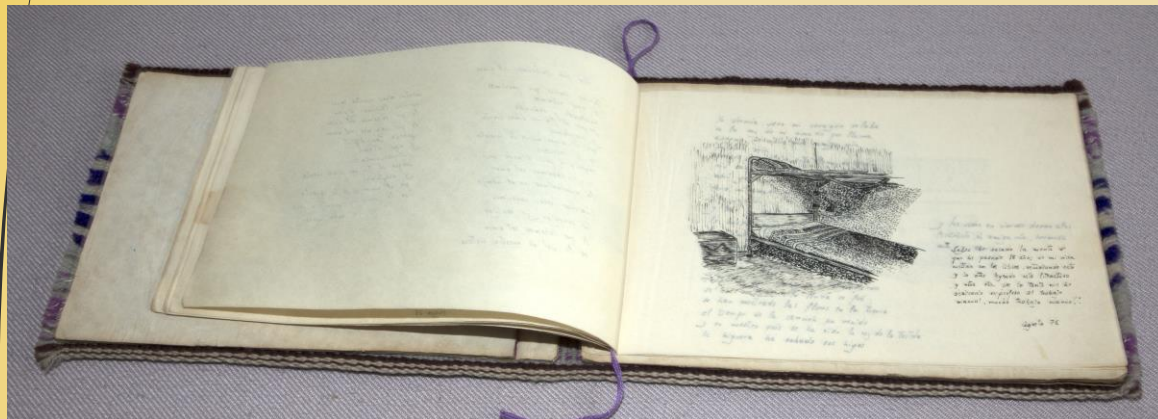
Shawls made by Jorge Silva (Captain of Air Force) whilst he was in Capuchinos - a Santiago's prison annex. ".. was made in a rectangular frame of wood that had nails every 10 cm. It was worked diagonally. The fringes were added at the end using crochet."

Copper embossing of a Mapuche woman, made in 1974 in Tres Alamos concentration camp by Hernando Fernandez-Canque for his mother Isabel Canque, and after her death his family decided it should come back to him.



Woman carved in wood. Part of a set of three carvings by Vladimir Vega whilst in Talca's penitentiary (circa 1975-1976). Prisoners did not have images / models to use in making the objects. His fellow prisoners teased him saying that he has a good memory or knew her well as they found the carving very lifelike.

...and we also wrote



And I cried...

- ▶ *And they were torturing children, mother. They were stretching their bones, mother. And giving them electric shocks, mother. Hour upon hour, mother. Interminably ages, then ages again, mother. And their shrieks were all around me mother. And to blackest black, to demented world, mother. We grew giddy with grief, and I cried as I have never cried before mother. I cried in a frenzy, mother, desperate to my last fibre, mother. And the children screamed in more and more anguish, mother. And I cried, mother, and I will never cry again, as long as I live.*

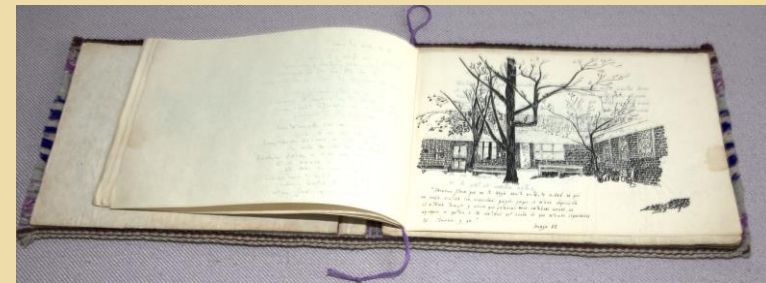
(Maria Eugenia Bravo, 'Prayer in the National Stadium')



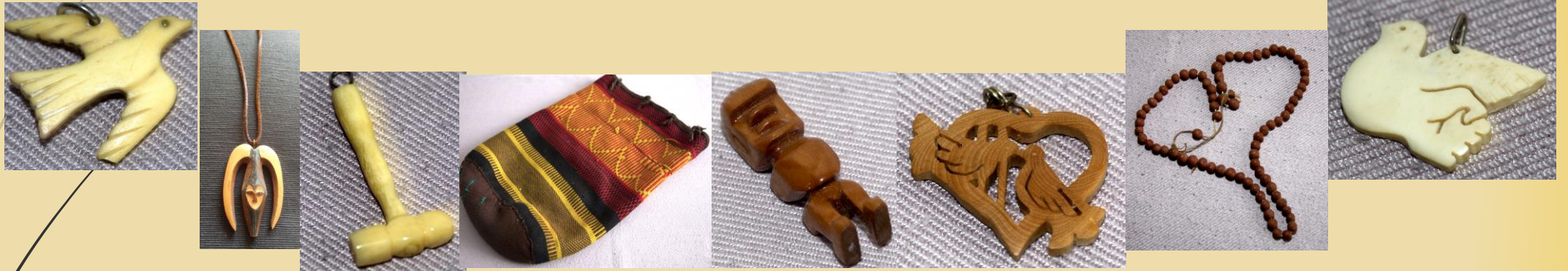
Textile Notebook

- “This notebook was hand-made by my partner Armando. He made it as a present for me. We were prisoners in a concentration camp run by the military dictatorship that had deposed the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.”
- “Armando loom-knitted the cover and there are delicate drawings inside the notebook that show scenes he could see from his place of detention. Like this seashore drawing from when he was in Ritoque detention camp. The writings are quotations from letters I had written to him and poems by poets such as Antonio Machado, Rabindranath Tagore and Pablo Neruda.”
- “This notebook, its handmade textile cover and the drawing show that we can draw strength even in the most desolate situations and create and find beauty that gives us hope.”

Cristina Zamora



...and continue to resist



The objects crossed the fences and today they are an example of solidarity, resilience and resistance – and the objects continue to resist

They tried to cut all the flowers, but they couldn't keep spring from coming!!

Thank you...

- ▶ Each object gives an account of a history, which cannot be seen on its own without knowing how they were built and what it meant for the people who made them, individually or through a shared moment of creation
- ▶ **Thank you** to all political prisoners who managed to create the various objects in this exhibition, full of meaning and beauty. Also thank families or friends of political prisoners who kept objects and were so kind to lend them to us. And to those relatives that during imprisonment of loves one provided them all the support to survive and who were essential to get the objects across the fences.

Gloria Miqueles