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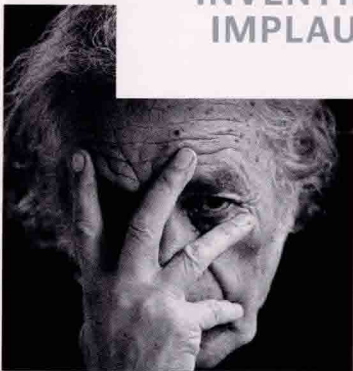
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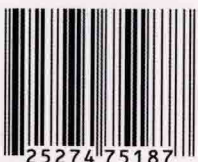
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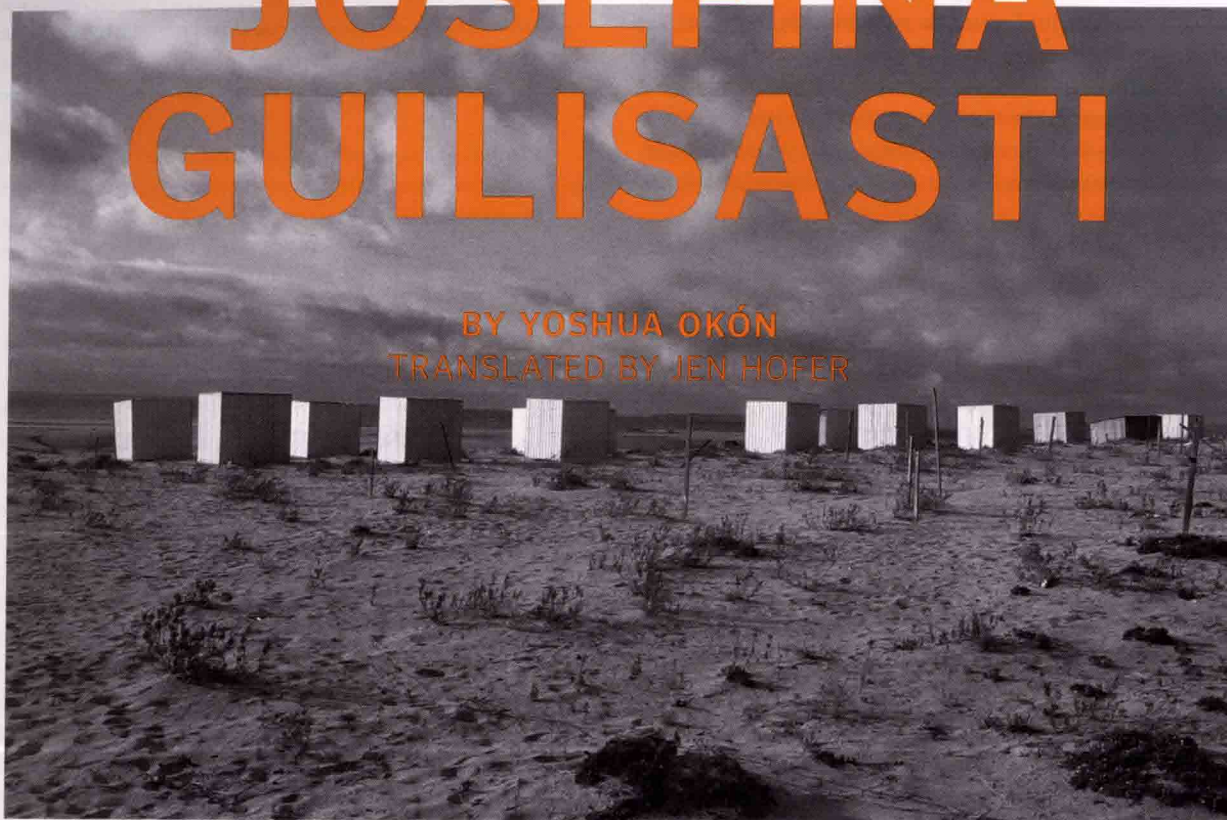
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JOSEFINA GUILISASTI

BY YOSHUA OKÓN
TRANSLATED BY JEN HOFER



Photographs of Puerto Viejo and Marfa. Next spread: paintings from the series *Marfa/Puerto Viejo*, 2006, oil on canvas, 47 × 78." Courtesy of the artist and the Blanton Museum of Art.

Josefina Guilisasti and I met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where we both participated in the 2007 Mercosur Biennial, a particularly special event because it brought together for the first time artists from Latin American countries who emerged during the mid-'90s. Josefina and I soon realized that we both shared the experience of having a double role as artists and art-community builders. We both were cofounders of artist-run spaces—she INCUBO, in Santiago de Chile, and I, La Panadería, in Mexico City—that filled a void in the staid and institutionalized art contexts from which they arose. We soon began a dialogue around our experiences and the way our double practices informed each other.

In her art, Guilisasti is deeply aware of the specificity of her medium and the context in which her paintings develop. She collapses references, highlighting the discrepancies between artistic and social discourses. Her series *Marfa/Puerto Viejo*, for instance, juxtaposes images of Judd's sculptures with those of squatters' beach huts.

Santiago is experiencing a great moment—a paradigm shift in the culture seems to be taking place thanks to the many independent initiatives of artists and intellectuals. INCUBO is one such initiative. It has established a new model of discourse that is open, transparent, and connective, one that counteracts the city's isolation and stimulates communities within and beyond Chile's borders.

YOSHUA OKÓN It would be good to start with a solid description of your project *Marfa/Puerto Viejo*.

JOSEFINA GUILISASTI The project originated from an invitation I got from the Blanton Museum to travel to Marfa, Texas—which I did in 2005—and a piece of mine that documents a *toma de verano*, a temporary takeover of a beach in Chile. People occupy land that doesn't belong to them in order to spend their two-month summer vacations at the beach. Although this happens in different places in Chile, the specific *toma de verano* that functioned as my model was the one at the beach in Puerto Viejo, which is taken over by people who live 30 miles away in Calera, just north of Santiago.

YO Has this been going on for a long time or is it a relatively recent phenomenon?

JG It's been going on in Chile for six years, and the most remarkable thing is that the illegal squatters aren't removed because of the time the bureaucracy takes to get things done. People are only there for a two-month period, and although they always return, it's not until the next year. Along the coast, they install a set of cube-shaped modules made of cardboard and wood that contain all they need for the summer. Thus, they create a spontaneous intervention into the landscape.

YO What was the original documentation project that concerns these beach takeovers?

JG A piece titled *State of Transit*, which consisted of photographs taken at Puerto Viejo. The images were printed in large format and brought to Haus Am Kleistpark in Berlin. I laid out approximately 300 prints on seven folding tables, and the viewers could take the prints home. The tables the images were displayed on themselves had the double function of being minimal objects occupying transitory space and unfolding in the exhibition space, just like the makeshift cardboard homes people install in Puerto Viejo: they're meant to be ephemeral. Similarly, the piles of printed images were meant to disappear over the time the exhibition was open.

Later, the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas, invited me to do a residency in Marfa, with the condition that I produce a work. For my project, I photographically documented the Donald Judd works located there. I replicated the focal point of view I used when documenting the structures in Puerto Viejo, situating myself



Display tables for *State of Transit*, Haus Am Kleistpark, Berlin.



in the same position in relation to the object. The backgrounds were nearly identical landscapes; the Chilean desert and the West Texas desert. The powerful thing was the difference between the two realities: in one, there are “artworks,” and in the other, dwelling places loaded with social significance. I was interested in working with this distant resemblance between cardboard and concrete—two industrial materials with very different ways of translating light and texture—but I also was interested in the structural similarities between Judd’s modules on the beach. Later, I used each of the photographic documents of the two places and translated them into a series of monochrome paintings.

YO Why do you choose painting, specifically?

JG I’m making an effort to continue painting, as a sort of resistance against entering the realm of new media. If using photography was a way of registering the specific materials, and therefore presenting the differences between two distinct realities, painting helped me to erase those differences. The monochromatic grayness of the paintings intensified the confusion of not knowing whether the referent pertained to Marfa or Puerto Viejo.

YO I’m very interested in the translation process from photography to painting, since that twice-removed level of representation helps the viewer gain an even greater distance from what’s being seen.

JG That’s right; I think that painting confuses the viewer more than documentary images do. The spectator has to approach the work more closely. There’s a different form of seeing when we encounter a painting.

YO Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro’s text about *Marfa/Puerto Viejo* talks about your going from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the detailed, and in this sense, the fact that the series consists of realist paintings is particularly relevant. If they had been painted with abstraction or reduction as your reference point, they would have been situated within the paradigms of Minimalism. If you

were to eliminate their subtleties and details, which make palpable the dramatic differences between these similar landscapes, the paintings would lose their meaning.

JG The Blanton Museum show consisted of eight large-scale paintings on which additional small-format oil paintings were placed—at the spectator’s eye level—so that a large portion of empty space was present on the canvas. [EDS. NOTE: THIS TEXT IS PLACED OVER THE BLANK PORTION OF THE CANVAS.] It’s interesting how we translate Minimalism to a Latin American context: here we have some information about particular referents, but it’s purified, cleansed, out of context. We distort its aesthetic when it enters our space, which is why it interested me to find in Judd a Minimalism similar to ours. The makeshift homes in these illegal beach communities is not an inherently Minimalist object. Its context is completely different—it’s an active living space, which has absolutely nothing to do with the Minimalism of the ’60s, and, therefore, should be read in a completely different way. I think the cleansed transfer of Minimalism to Latin America has been very harmful, specifically in Chile, where there’s a reading of it that doesn’t take into consideration the complexity within which that period of art history developed. An “aesthetic” is transferred very readily, one with which I don’t think we have a very direct relationship. That’s why I tried to incorporate the aesthetic and density intrinsic to Minimalism into my show.

YO As I see it, the crisis of Minimalism—its implicit puritanism—isn’t unique to Chile or to Latin America, but, rather, is global. When you thoroughly study the work of many of the Minimalist artists, you find as much idiosyncrasy as you do in any other kind of art; the difference is simply that Minimalism creates an illusion of objectivity and purity. Or rather, it has an obsession with objectivity and purity. Your project seems relevant to me not only from a Latin American perspective, but from an international one as well.



JG Sure, there was a certain puritanism. Now, it's interesting to think about how the Minimalist aesthetic, within the context of Marfa, is also related to the landscape. That is, Donald Judd's work inserts itself into a medium of saturation, and is in dialogue with many unpredictable elements. That caught my attention, in contrast to the experience of seeing Minimalist works in closed spaces, in institutions. In Puerto Viejo, the viewing experience is similar to Marfa. It also takes place within a landscape in which distinct elements come together in a completely unregulated way. The beach takeovers are illegal, and have an alternate way of functioning: the ephemeral materials of the homes speak to this. It was very interesting to see how people removed them—by March, the beach would once again be the same beach as always. The modules were precarious, light, and transportable, in contrast to Judd's structures, which last through time both in terms of their materiality and in terms of his idea of what constitutes a work of art.

YO I think this is a good time to talk about how *Marfa/Puerto Viejo* connects with your practice on a general level. What are the constants of your working practice?

JG I'm very interested in precariousness. For example, the conditions that make it possible for Puerto Viejo to be inhabited for a two-month period. Such a precarious way of living for a fixed period of time can be extrapolated to the cultural mentality that has developed in Chile. With our artist-run space INCUBO, we've tried to locate precariousness and work from there. We build structures, or systems, to continue to work *with* that precariousness instead of against it. I've always been very concerned with the question of how to make the most of things, how to avoid constructing fictions. In Chile we're subjected to working in an atmosphere that's not very rigorous, in which the cultural system only half-functions, and artists don't have any stability in terms of labor, making it difficult to work in a coherent way.

For example, the Contemporary Art Museum in Santiago doesn't have a permanent collection that might be studied and from which an ongoing art critical practice might be established. There's no continuity among the exhibitions that are programmed. Lately, art collections are being developed within the private sector.

Artists in Chile exist within a context of many institutions and physical spaces, but in the absence of mental spaces. INCUBO was built on this notion of precariousness, and its first action was to bring new perspectives from abroad so that artists increase the range of points of view from which their work is considered. Initially, INCUBO began as a self-financed project, which consisted of providing art-handling services for all the local artists who were showing internationally. The Chilean government financed our travel, lodging, and per diems.

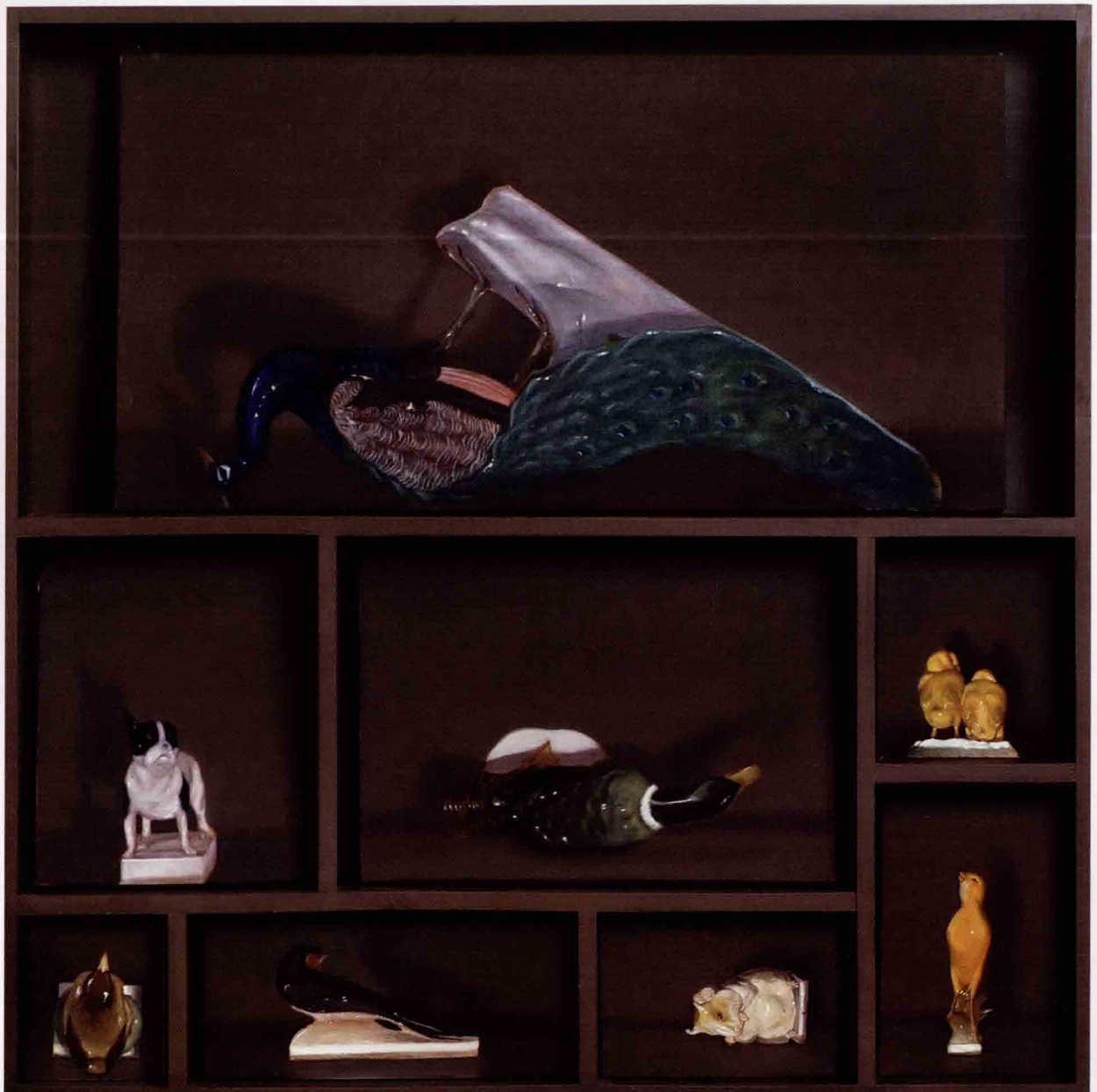
YO So, to put it succinctly, you attempt to maintain precariousness, while providing it with some stability?

JG I confront precariousness, because in our reality, to not do so would be to enter into the fiction of thinking that everything's fine. We're making the most of it and establishing a workable standard. We're connected with all the arts spaces in Santiago and the people working in the arts and other disciplines, and that's how we create a local network. We collaborate, keeping in mind that we all have certain lacks which are a product of that same fiction I mentioned earlier. We find ways to alleviate mutual lacks, for example, when it comes to exhibition space. Or, for instance, for our publications, we work together with established presses. In any case, the key is to build networks so that everyone can offer her or his particular skills, so that each of us fulfills a role and we all improve together.

YO So one of INCUBO's central missions is to connect the local scene with the international scene, correct?

JG Of course, but in a way in which artists might have

A powerful thing is the difference between the realities of Marfa and Puerto Viejo: In one, there are “artworks,” and in the other, dwelling places loaded with social significance.



From the series *Bodegones (Still Lives)*, 2007,
16 modules, 43 x 43", 125 paintings, oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist.

the possibility of being in dialogue with people from abroad while also maintaining an awareness of the specificity of their own work. It's about having access to spaces outside our own, and creating a mutual nourishment between inside and outside. It has a lot to do with my work and my relationship with my field. INCUBO came out of a very personal need that I sense a number of artists in the field also share. Thanks to this project, we've begun to gain international attention, and this affords us more feedback on our own practices. That's what interests me.

YO Precariousness can lead to instability. At the other extreme, permanence and solidity can be very static and limiting. Does this concern you? How do you achieve a balance?

JG It's interesting to analyze precariousness as one among a variety of conditions rather than as an extreme. It's a situation that deeply upset me before, because it demands enormous resistance. But once you understand it, precariousness becomes something favorable for artists: it puts you in situations in which you have to develop many different qualities in order to be able to survive, and that resourcefulness is a fundamental skill. For example, Chilean theory is incapable of articulating a coherent reading of the problems set forth by contemporary artworks. Art is always read from the same point of view, located in the context of the dictatorship. The *Escena de Avanzada* was a group of artists brought together by the theorist Nelly Richard in the '70s; they constructed a theoretical frame from which to understand works developed then and now in Chile. This theoretical vision was sufficiently consistent within the specific context from which it arose, but it blocks alternate readings and different types of artistic practices, centered on issues other than the dictatorship, from existing. Managing to survive within such a hermetic scene is extremely challenging. Formulating a structure or a project in these conditions is highly valuable, which is what you also did in Mexico.

YO Do you think that the structure of INCUBO has successfully provided that minimal stability within precariousness?

JG Yes, for one single reason: it's had continuity. Artists like Alvaro Oyarzún, Mónica Bengoa, César Gabler, Máximo Corvalán, Pablo Chiuminatto, and Bernardo Oyarzún, among others, have developed visions for their work. They've shown abroad and they've also built ongoing connections with people outside Chile. While we all happen to be from the same generation, our work is very different from one another's.

Connections are the most important thing. It's really lovely—now we have a common dialogue that doesn't solely translate into an international dialogue. What's crucial is how a variety of commonalities among us come to be connected. It doesn't matter if the people are in Chile or elsewhere—what connects us to people abroad is transparent.

YO Let's talk about the relationship between INCUBO and your own work. You've said that you're involved in INCUBO

for your own sake; that, as an artist, INCUBO allows you to maintain a dialogue with the larger world. However—and I'm saying this because of my personal experience as director of *La Panadería*—we work within a field in which it's expected that you be one thing or the other: an artist, a facilitator, an administrator.... To perform more than one role can generate quite a bit of confusion in terms of how we are perceived. Can you talk about the effects that running INCUBO have had on your own artistic career?

JG At the beginning it was very complicated. INCUBO defined itself first as a residency for curators, and therefore curator Cecilia Brunson, with whom I developed the project in 2004, was the logical spokesperson of the program. I was working alongside her, but my role was more complicated than hers, since I'm an artist. Even so, I had this idea of building a system that might make a larger dialogue within our field possible. For me, in that era, INCUBO was a way of observing the relationship being built between invited curators and local artists. Now INCUBO is not defined solely as a residency program for curators. It's something broader: it's a space for a range of different affinities to come together, a space in which each element is related to the others, and we make the best out of the state of precariousness that I was talking about earlier. We continue with residencies for curators, but in a broader form that's more in keeping with the context in which we find ourselves. Today, for me, this is an important shift, since I've assumed a double role, participating as an artist-administrator. It's been fundamental for me to construct my work from that place, while maintaining a certain distance so the administrative tasks don't become my work. I feel that painting has helped me enormously in maintaining that position. Once, someone told me that through painting I'd be able to articulate a pictorial project around all my ideas about art. That was very helpful to me in clarifying my position as an artist, since painting demands from me a different amount of time, a different attitude. It's a truly individual task that's achieved through many hours of dedicated studio work, and working in both realms has allowed me to move away from the self-involvement that painting entails.

YO What do you think is our function as artists? Is there an ethical obligation for us to contribute to the well-being of the artistic community?

JG I don't know. I'm more and more interested in artists who have that concern for the larger scene. I think that artists who lock themselves up in their studios and work only for themselves are limited—they aren't enriched by dialogues generated in a wider environment, and thus they fall into a sort of monologue.

YO If we understand the function of the artist as intrinsically linked to the social, and *dependent* on dialogue, then the necessity of filling gaps arises, as with INCUBO. In this way, it's not just you, but also an entire community, who benefits from your administrative work. However, in our culture, the function of the artist is predominantly understood as an individualist one. Each artist has her or his career, and the personal success of each doesn't neces-



Bingo (triptych), 2004, oil on canvas, 267 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 67 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
Courtesy of the artist.

sarily translate into collective success. Do you think your double function can eventually become a problem?

JG Working for others also benefits you, because you construct a circuit. It's my generation that's making changes in Santiago, in contrast to previous generations that were subjected to a kind of dictatorship of thought. Obviously, they too worked to support their own context. Previous generations had the task of working during a very complicated period: the dictatorship. Language and artistic works alike ended up being more closed, losing direct contact with a general public. Given the period when these works were developed, they were opportune: they accounted for a real context, but beyond that historical period, they lost their relevance as they turned into artworks for export.

I studied under that previous generation at the Universidad de Chile. I always wondered how to break with that highly hermetic and dominant system, how to forge a different path. It's been very difficult, because it's like killing your parents, and the question of how to go about it was so fraught. I chose to initiate a completely new model. That new model is friendly, open, transparent, and connective—that's what has allowed this teamwork to exist.

YO In terms of the dictatorship of thought you found it necessary to overthrow, you're referring to the Marxist tradition that was once so predominant in Chile. Doesn't that assume that without a political agenda, art has no reason to exist?

JG Of course. It's a rigid, closed system. What interests us, in INCUBO, is not to structure *anything*. The project stays in the hands of the people who participate in it, and there's no system. We don't want to construct a new dictatorship; we want to break entirely with dictatorial modes of thought. In INCUBO there are two other people: Bárbara Palomino, a visual artist, and Gonzalo Pedraza, an art historian. They are fairly young, and the three of us work without any predetermined struc-

ture, each doing a little bit of everything. Hierarchies between us are completely eliminated.

YO Younger generations, as well as your own one, have received INCUBO very well.

JG In the long term the people who will benefit the most will be from future generations. There is a great deal of resistance in the older generation because we didn't include them in our project. We made a break because that was the only way to survive, and that break has been very complicated. We've had to do it, and we had to continue galloping along like racehorses, trying to maintain a degree of continuity without getting distracted—moving forward and not backward.

YO There's a break in terms of ideological sensibility.

JG Totally, and also to be able to speak with a language that's much more direct than the one spoken by older generations: that language of texts that one finds in catalogues and lectures, a language that comes from philosophy. Within this language, artworks become closed-off and attach themselves to distant discourses—there's no possibility for reflecting on them from different points of view. We try to speak simply, as you did in the lecture you gave, which was accessible to everyone. We're trying to break away from inaccessible militancy.

YO My understanding is that the equivalent of what we call La Ruptura in Mexico never occurred in Chile.

JG No, that didn't happen here.

YO My generation in Mexico, in contrast, reacted against the legacy of the La Ruptura generation—a generation of artists who, in turn, had reacted against political art. La Ruptura attacked the idea that art had to have a political agenda linked to militancy, but what wound up happening is that this art, which was predominantly abstract and formal, ended up being easily appropriated by the power structure. This was parallel to the Chilean dictatorship, since in Mexico there was also a dictatorship, but Mexico's was more veiled and less brutal. My generation