



2. INSIDE THE LA INDUSTRIAL MEMBRILLERA

Francisca Benitez

Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.

– Paulo Freire, from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968

Oro Dulce is an immersion into an agrarian artisanal production process, aiming to generate a discussion about new forms of urban-rural habitability in a territory of growing interconnectivity and hybridization, in a land that shakes constantly, with an increasingly globalized culture. The project originated in rural Pichingal, located in the Maule Region in Chile where I joined in the annual quince paste making activities of my family.

Quince trees are quite common in central Chile. Originally from Persia, the tree was introduced in South America by European colonizers. Quince paste, Dulce de Membrillo as we call it, seems to have originated in Spain, in Puente Genil, and is quite popular also in Argentina and Uruguay. My mother has been doing this for over 40 years, and my grandmother, at 94 years old,

is still an active laborer and an endless source of wisdom. The process entails picking the quinces from the trees, cleaning them, cutting them, cooking them in water, draining, mashing, cooking the paste with sugar, canning it, storing it, selling it and eating it. My dad created a mashing machine by putting together an old washing machine motor, bicycle parts and a manual meat grinder. The machine makes a loud noise, but he doesn't care because he is deaf. We all love his machine but he is obviously the best suited operator.

Growing up, I remember what the big to-do "la industrial membrillera" –"the quince factory"– meant in my house. We would collect empty cans all year around, even asking our classmates in school to save discarded cans for us – as a teen, I remember being utterly embarrassed by this –, and then the process itself required the temporary transformation of our home into a quince paste storage warehouse. Every single horizontal surface was occupied by these glowing golden bars – cylindrical, edible ones – weighing 1 kilogram each.

[1]





lot on the flux of world markets and followed the international demands for output, which meant a lot of pesticides and a lot of insecurity and risk. Even though these were two very different ways of doing things we all helped out in both. Of all the fruit seasons the Quince was the hardest, because the weather was always cold and the process is lengthy and laborious.

This, over the years, has created a way of making, of being together, of working together. It even created a particular

Dulce de Membrillo, with a precise golden colour and an aroma my mother is so proud of. I have been living in New York since 1998, therefore I have been absent from Pichingal and from the quince ritual that happens every fall in my family's home. I refer to it as a ritual not in a religious sense but in the sense of a solemnity and joy invested in performing a series of actions according to a prescribed order. In 2010, when I was there visiting, a big earthquake shook the whole region and my family skipped the quince ritual that year. It was the only year they have ever skipped it, as far as I can remember.

My mother, a full time teacher at a French school in the nearby city of Curicó, always had this approach to working the land. On a small scale, she would make marmalades, pastes, nectars and canned fruits, with whatever was available in the season, either on our land, in the neighboring fields or in the market. Her distribution network was word of mouth and door to door. My father, on the other hand, joined a cooperative of small and medium farmers to export our fruits raw. It is interesting to see in retrospect both ways of working the same land. My mother's method was small scale yet more stable, while my father's depended a



Perhaps because as a culture we are pretty familiar with earthquakes, the death toll wasn't so high, though the physical destruction was considerable and within that, the loss of landmark architecture. A lot of my point of view has been influenced by having been an architect, I read and understand history by looking at and inhabiting buildings, structures and cities. In this overwhelming panorama, the immaterial patrimony seemed to fill the void left by these collapsed structures with a renewed urgency and strength. That's why I wrote *Décimas Telúricas* and that's also why and how Oro Dulce was born.

Liberatory education is a situation where the teacher and the students both have to be learners.

-Ira Schor and Paulo Freire, from *A pedagogy for liberation*, 1987

I am resilient

-Tangerine Jones, 2014

It is in this context that I decided to go to Chile in 2011 and join my family to help, be part of, document and learn collectively even more about the quince paste making process. After doing it for so many years there is a lot we take for granted, and lot of interesting questions started to emanate through Oro Dulce.



This project involved a conversation with many people, coming from diverse experiences and disciplinary fields. There was Camila Marambio, the curator, who also directs the research residency program *Ensayos* based in Tierra del Fuego and whose work is devoted to expand the limits of artistic practice and collaboration. Sociology students Sofía Ugarte and Tomás Usón incorporated this work in their thesis project looking into other families and communities



who do similar work in the region. The anthropologist José Bengoa's illuminating knowledge was key to understanding the historical, political and



relationship to the colonial model of exploitation. Carla Macchiavello, art historian, delved into the role of video and documentation in our project. Juan Manuel Garrido, philosopher, also discussed the role of documentation on a more abstract level, and René Valenzuela, artist, academic and curator, exposed us to a lot of his interesting work in education and media literacy and criticality. A big part of the conversation was devoted to ideas of land distribution and in this regard the contributions of the Casa Museo Eduardo Frei Montalva were very important, the bringing back to the table, at least at a very broad and conceptual level, the Agrarian Reform.

One hectare per family would resolve the economic problem of the Elqui's campesino if the horrible and dishonest latifundio wasn't devouring us, and making us hungry, there as well as along the whole country.

- Gabriela Mistral, in letters to *El Mercurio*, 1933

This collective research reinvigorated every member of my family, and hidden stories and myths erupted in the most remote corners. Perhaps the most obscure and fascinating of all revelations was our uncle Daniel Sbarra's, member of the Argentinian rock band Virus, who told us "Dulcemembriyo" - with



that spelling - was the name of the first band he was part of with Federico Moura, active from the late 60's to the early 70's.

Artist and musician Elisita Punto also collaborated and joined us in Pichingal with her portable silkscreen kit to produce a poster for the first show. You can hear ripples of this experience in her song *Tradición*, from MKRNI's album *Playa Futuro*.

*Tradición oculta
no es un misterio
es tu pasado
olvidado*

*si quieres recordar
tienes que traer aqui
desde tu sangre
tu memoria
tu memoria*

*está en ti
solo hay que recordar*

*está en ti
solo hay que recordar*

*Tradición
Tradición*

*incorpora
tráelo
prácticalo*

*tradición oculta
volver a vivir*

volver a vivir

tradición

-*Tradición* by MKRNI, from the album *Playa Futuro*, 2012

*Hidden tradition
it's not a mystery
is your past
forgotten*

*if you want to remember
you have to bring here
from your blood
your memory
your memory*

*it is in you
only have to remember
tradition
tradition*

*incorporate it
bring it
practice it*

*hidden tradition
to live again
to live again*

tradition

(My imperfect translation)

The work *Oro Dulce* is about knowledge transmission, immaterial patrimony, and anonymous creative practices that exist despite the aggressive neoliberal model and the "mall culture" that grows so rapidly and devastatingly in this country, as in so many other places. It is about an alternative economy based on another type of gold standard; an edible capital. A capital that isn't accumulated to become money, but it is quickly, and sometimes even through barter, transformed into education, home improvements and the like. It is a proposition for other modes

of work and socialization, the pursuit, even at micro level, of the dismantling of traditional hierarchies that are inherent to the ways labour is organized under the capitalist system. It is about life, and ultimately, it is about love.

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Endnote

The video of Oro Dulce was originally exhibited at Die Ecke Gallery in Santiago, Chile in the spring of 2011, along with the 530 kilograms of quince jam produced during the filming. For the duration of the exhibit, the art gallery became the distribution outlet for the product, overlapping the present and past roles of the corner building as an art gallery and corner store. The table became a record of this, by logging in the end destination of each quince paste can, and was later exhibited at the Museo Histórico Nacional.

Francisca Benítez is an artist living and working in New York, USA.

Her works are available at www.franciscabenitez.org/. Watch the performance of *Décimas Telúricas* at <http://franciscabenitez.org/works/decimas-teluricas/>



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[1] A photograph by the artist's father, taken in 1982

[2 - 6] Stills from the film *Oro Dulce*

[7] Installation view from the exhibition at Die Ecke Gallery, Santiago, Chile, 2011

All images courtesy the artist