

A WANDERING BODY

SERGIO ZEVALLOS IN THE GRUPO CHACLACAYO (1982-1994)

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The work of the Grupo Chaclacayo (1982-1994) has been a largely unknown episode in Peruvian contemporary art. Narrated more like a myth or rumor—their works have not been exhibited again in Peru since their first and only show at the Museo de Arte de Lima in 1984—this collective experience constitutes one of the most daring chapters of artistic experimentation to come out of Peru in the '80s. The Grupo Chaclacayo consisted of the German artist Helmut Psotta and the Peruvian students Raúl Avellaneda and Sergio Zevallos, with the participation of various collaborators. Toward the end of 1982, the three artists went into self-imposed exile in a house in the district of Chaclacayo, where they worked for over six years. In January 1989, the group decided to move to Germany due to a lack of economic resources and the growing social and political hostility of the armed conflict in Peru. The artists took with them all the material they had produced, and what they couldn't transport to Europe, they burned, carrying the ashes over in a small container. After arriving in Germany shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the group presented a large-scale exhibition that summed up their work in Peru, entitled *Imágenes de la Muerte. Perú o el fin del sueño europeo* (Images of Death: Peru, or the End of the European Dream), which was shown in different museums around Germany. The group dissolved in 1995. All the works and materials produced never returned to Peru.

Perú... Un Sueño (Peru... A Dream). The Grupo Chaclacayo had its first and only exhibition in Peru under the title *Perú... Un Sueño* (Peru... A Dream) in the Museo de Arte de Lima in November 1984, sponsored by the Goethe Institute. Just hours before the opening, several works by Raúl Avellaneda and Sergio Zevallos were covered with black cloth by authorities from the German Embassy, although the fabric was later removed by those attending the inauguration. *Perú... Un Sueño* presented early works by the group such as drawings, collages, installations, and several series of photographs of actions, all influenced by popular prayer cards, family albums, street art, and newspaper clippings. After this exhibition, which also received hostile and aggressive responses from commentators in press, the Grupo Chaclacayo decided to permanently withdraw from the local art scene, going on to produce a vast corpus of graphic and performance works that would never be shown in public in Peru. During this second stage, the group made new series of color photographs, depicting even more visceral reenactments of the primary episodes of political violence, as well as scenes of deep-seated sexual and racial discrimination by society.

Self-Imposed Exile. The self-imposed exile of the group in 1982 came about after Helmut Psotta distanced himself from the School of Arts of the Universidad Católica in Lima, where he had arrived as a visiting professor. In his few months at the university, Psotta encouraged creative exercises involving the use of photocopies and distortion, using newspaper clippings of early accounts of the violence and death resulting from the armed conflict between the subversive group Shining Path and the national armed forces. In response to the forced departure of Psotta, Zevallos and Avellaneda also decided to abandon the university and go work together. This move to an unoccupied house outside Lima was an attempt to gain some distance from the economic circuits and models of good taste that predominated in the art system, where the group's practices—collages made from waste, sadomasochistic reenactments, religious transvestitism, processions of altars made from trash, etc.—would find no place. This displacement toward the periphery grew out of their desire to explore states of freedom beyond social norms. Through actions in private spaces and occasional incursions into public space, the group gave life to a pagan iconography that fell somewhere between the theatricalization of Catholic devotion and the resignification of the sinister outlook informed on a daily basis by the discovery of tortured bodies buried in unmarked graves in the southern mountains of Peru.

Saint Rose of Lima. The image of Saint Rose (1586-1617), fervently revered for her extreme spiritual devotion and her self-inflicted bodily punishment, is a recurring symbol in the works produced by the Grupo Chaclacayo starting in 1982. Saint Rose is revealed by the group as an ambiguous symbol of how pain and suffering are associated with the promise of happiness and wellbeing, thus questioning the role of mystic imaginaries in stories of oppression in Occidental tradition. Sergio Zevallos is one of the artists who has most insistently explored her depictions, using her image in collages, drawings, and photographs that attempt to link the past and present, opulence and misery, eroticism and brutality, as an exasperated comment on colonial violence in the terror of war. The group's work, and in particular some of Zevallos's projects, thus add yet another chapter to the history of the iconography of Saint Rose, accentuating the role played by her image in the cultural matrix of Lima's residents.