Owen Silverman

“What Are Our Collective Dreams? Global Connections — Abandoned Friendships”

Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

A Student’s Review

I visited the Zachęta in Warsaw in January, 2026 during the early stages of writing my master’s thesis on *arpilleras*. It was my first time seeing the textiles “in the flesh,” as Roberta often refers to them, and not behind glass or through a screen. My first encounter with *arpilleras* was in Amsterdam, a year prior at the Stadelijk Museum’s “Unravel” exhibition. The works were sheltered behind glass situated on a wall facing a Cecilia Vicuña textilework hanging from the ceiling.

The *arpilleras* in Warsaw were hung from wires extending to the ceiling, affixed to a burlap backing that had been suspended with a long wooden peg. There was enough space to walk behind the textiles, though I seemed to be the first person willing to do so. Other museum goers followed suit, carefully viewing the exposed stitchings visible on the back of the *arpilleras,* something I knew the curators intentionally included.



The backs of the suspended *arpilleras*.

Prior to traveling to Poland, I had spoken at length with Roberta about the concept of solidarity. We agreed the textiles were produced to be “read,” as many *arpilleristas* referred to themselves

as pamphleteers. A larger *arpillera* did appear behind glass to the right of the four hanging textiles, laid flat on a wooden table. Its orientation required viewers to lean over the piece to properly read it. At one point I was even scolded by museum security for leaning on the wooden fixture, as I had been hunched over for well over ten minutes.



Tabletop display of *Al Servicio de la vida / Servicing life* and *Prisioneros de Cuatro Álamos / Prisoners of Cuatro Álamos Torture Centre*

I felt instantly that this fatigue, which arose from maintaining a fairly vulnerable position above the *arpillera,* was intended by design. The *arpillera* was much larger than its peers and included a range of text, figures, and structures to be seen. By displaying it horizontally, viewers were invited to meet the textile at its level. Rather than with most high art displays, in which viewers are permitted to stand or even sit before a wall-hung fabric or painting, this *arpillera* necessitated viewers to close their distance from the piece.

The exhibition cemented an idea of visible, transmissible solidarity. Yet a somber tone also carried through from a segment of the exhibition's title: "Abandoned Friendships." The sentiment that the *arpilleras* belong not only to a forgotten era of history, but represent a former relic of solidarity between two now-considered distant countries. Joined with me was a Polish colleague who, upon reading a number of the written documents pertaining to Poland's solidarity with Chile, was even surprised to learn the extent of the two countries' relationship. Poland's communist history aligned with the Allende period of Chilean socialism, which frames solidarity

between the two states as a somewhat expected conclusion. And yet my colleague's surprise, as well as my own, at the extent of interactions that bridged the countries together is worthy of reflecting upon.



La cueca sola / Dancing cueca alone suspended before Oksana Briukhovetska's *In Solidarity with Ukraine* (2022)

The "collective dreams" of communist Poland and socialist Chile were not far from one another. Both strived to redistribute national wealth, socialize healthcare and education, and nationalize key sectors for global trade. Inhabitants of both countries also experienced immense poverty, an increasingly divided national politic, and — in the case of Chile under Pinochet — resisted oppression through student protests, clandestine publications, and the establishment of workers unions. Polish artists produced a number of artistic works donated to the *Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende,* including portraits of Allende. As such, the presentation of the *arpilleras* against the backdrop of a Ukrainian textile, surrounded by Polish objects of solidarity towards Palestinian, Cuban, and Vietnamese movements, offered a deeply international and intersectional perspective of solidarity that universalized the act of support.

As a student who had up until this point been engrossed by *arpilleras* primarily via print publications and digital scans, it was moving to see the textiles displayed so openly in person. I remained fascinated by the concept of solidarity throughout my writing of my master's thesis,

and my reading of the *arpilleras* in Warsaw confirmed my beliefs towards the textiles as journalistic publications.

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