



A CONVERSATION ABOUT ARPILLERAS AND QUILTS AS ARTISTIC AND EMOTIONAL SELF EXPRESSION BY WOMEN IN TROUBLED TIMES, WITH A FOCUS ON THE ARPILLERA KNOWN AS YESTERDAY AND TODAY BY THE PERUVIAN WOMEN'S GROUP, KUYANAKUY

**Roberta Bacic**, former professor and human rights researcher in Chile, now resident in Northern Ireland.

**Alba Sanfeliu**, researcher for Arts and Peace at the School for a Culture of Peace, Barcelona Autonomous University, Spain

**Mari Ray**, translator

**T. Randahl Morris & Mitzi Bales**, editors

Background:

**Kuyanakuy** in the Quechua language of Peru means "let us love one another." It is an organisation of women, mostly from rural zones, who were relocated to the low income suburbs of the capital Lima during the civil war of 1980 to 2000. There they joined together to confront the violence and forced displacement they were experiencing. Through their group activities, they forged a support network to maintain a sense of identity, to attempt to find solutions, and to stay occupied. One of their most successful activities was the making of *arpilleras*, of which Yesterday and Today is a prime example. They used scraps of material on a burlap sackcloth backing.

On 1 May 2002, after nine months of work, the arpillera shown here was presented to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Peru. The next month, the women displayed it at the doors of the court which was working on the findings of the commission. At one point, there was a 24 hour vigil.

In 2006, the arpillera was sent to Roberta Bacic by a colleague in Germany, Gaby Franger, who had lived in Peru and she decided to bring it to the attention of the public. Consequently, she travelled to many countries to display it. Since March 2008, it has become a part of the permanent exhibition curated by Gaby Franger in Nuremberg, Germany and is an integral element in this website <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/quilts/>

Textile Art:

*Arpilleras* and quilts have been a means of **artistic expression** by women worldwide to depict the horrors and atrocities of human rights abuses. Sewing, embroidering, appliquéing and stitching, women explore the effects of armed conflict, suppression, vulnerability, violence and trauma, among other ordeals in their daily lives.

The increase in the making of *arpilleras* and quilts in many countries in the last few decades shows how the textile arts can reveal and testify to the fearful human rights violations and atrocities. For example, the Chilean *arpilleras* of the 1970s, when the oppressive Pinochet regime crushed all protest, allowed what could not be voiced aloud to be expressed silently.



Details of Yesterday and Today. Photographed by Colin Peck during the week it was displayed in his house museum, Prehen House (<http://www.pehen.net>). Photo in Roberta Bacic's personal archive. Permission to reproduce any photo must be obtained.

- The *arpilleras* are also a form of **political resistance**, with women using what is considered a domestic activity to tell their story of suffering and determination to survive.



Detail of Yesterday and Today by Colin Peck.



- The work is also a form of **therapy**, externalising the harsh experiences of their struggle to maintain their family life and helping them to rebuild (re-sew) their daily lives in new circumstances.

Detail of Yesterday and Today by Colin Peck.

- Making *arpilleras* also gives women a voice in **social reform and participation**, transforming their traditional female role. With their quilts, the *Kuyanaky* collective planted the seeds that blossomed into the protests of the 1980s.

- Moreover, the *arpilleras* **provide** a way for the women to obtain **resources** for survival. They must earn money as heads of household after most of their men were murdered.

In **Peru**, the *arpilleras* became widely known during the years of the civil war and they were the main outcry to denounce the atrocities. Other artistic work of protest included plaster, terra cotta, sculpture, embossing, woodwork and music. As in Chile, the arts facilitated the expression of emotion and protest. Many of these artistic works have been displayed by the Centre for Human Rights, Nuremberg, in an exhibition curated by Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle. It is named: "*When pain becomes art*"<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For further information: [http://www.menschenrechte.org/peru\\_ausstellung/peru\\_exposicion.htm](http://www.menschenrechte.org/peru_ausstellung/peru_exposicion.htm)



The expression of pain through art was picked up in **other countries**<sup>2</sup> around the world:

- For example, in **Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Thailand, Laos, Burma** and **Vietnam**, oppressed people used silk and cotton to narrate their stories of life and survival under great duress.

-When **Filipino** women were kidnapped by Japanese soldiers as sex slaves during World War II, they later expressed their demands for compensation through quilts. These were presented at the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 2000.

- In **South Africa**, tapestries brought to light the horrors and repressions of the apartheid regime.

- In **Afghanistan**<sup>3</sup>, after the Russian invasion and subsequent war, the designs of traditional rugs introduced new motifs related to armed conflict and violence.

- After 9/11 in the **United States**, there was an increase in textile art on patriotic themes.

### The arpillera from the artisans' association in Kuyanakuy

The women in the group describe what they express in their work:

*"Yesterday all was lost and we had to leave it all behind to save our lives: families, homes, country and land, animals and much more."* (2002)

---

<sup>2</sup> For further information: <http://www.siquiltmuseum.org> *Woven Witness: Afghan War Rugs. From the collection of Patricia Markovich.*

<sup>3</sup> For further information: <http://www.warrug.com>

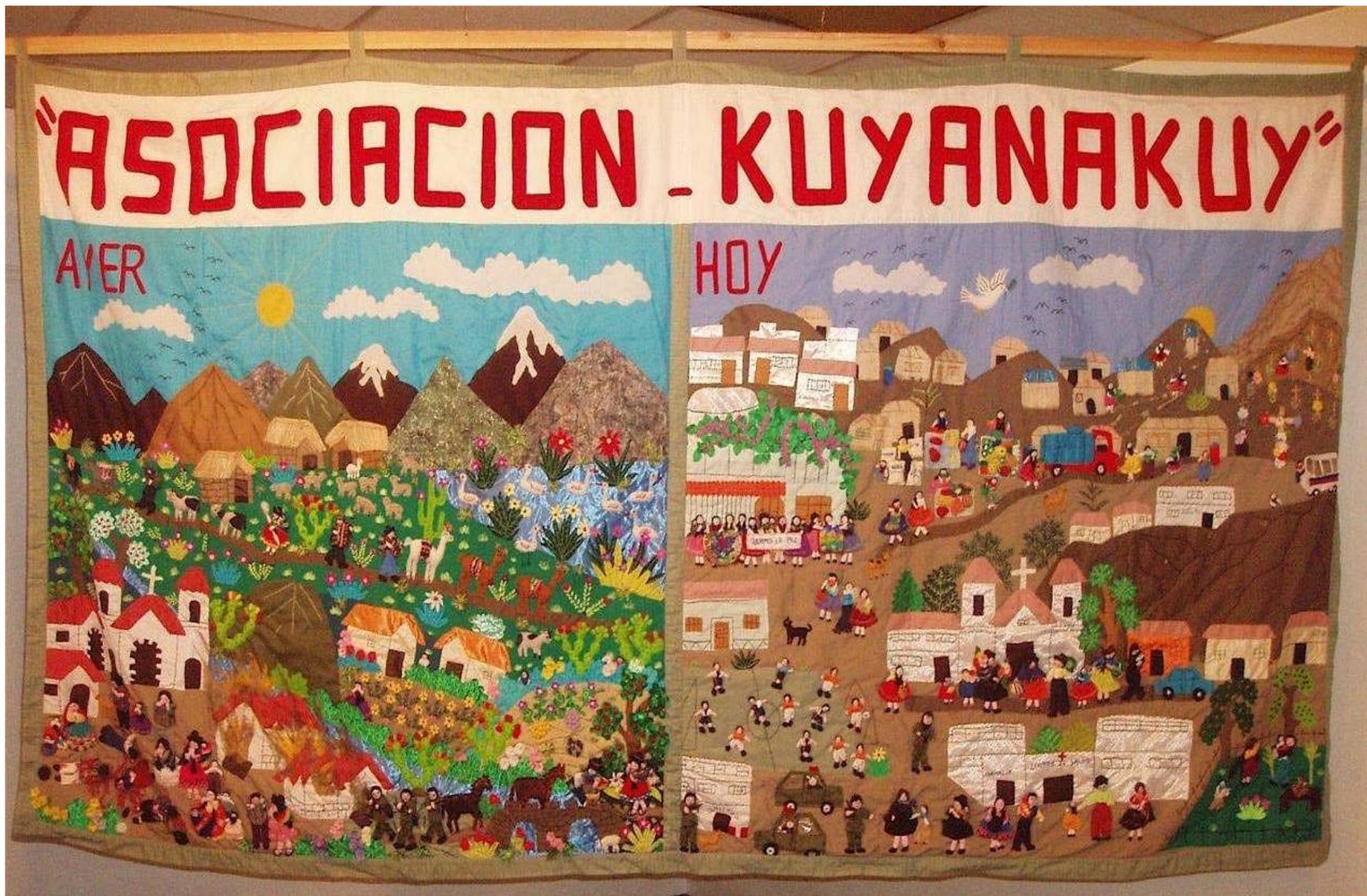


Photo of the arpillera exhibited at the West Belfast Festival, August 2006,  
By Clem McCartney from Roberta Bacic's personal archive.  
With authorization of Gaby Franger. Do not reproduce in any way.





### A Conversation with Roberta Bacic:

Alba Sanfeliu: Roberta Bacic came to Barcelona to display and talk about the *Kuyanakuy* arpillera at the School for a Culture of Peace in March 2007. We'd known each other for some time, but not until then did we "knit" together the idea of writing about the arpilleras. Initially, I proposed that she write an article for the website, but instead she suggested that we do "something" together. I accepted this idea and from that moment I found myself immersed in a sea of documentation and exchanges in emails and phone calls of things we found mutually interesting about the world of *arpilleras* and *arpilleristas* in articles, books, websites.

The Yesterday and Today arpillera received little fanfare when it was introduced in Peru, but there is no way to measure the impact it had on Peruvian society. As Roberta Bacic puts it: *"It enabled these women to **expose the reality of their lives** beyond their daily world as a contribution to truth and boosted their **self-esteem**, giving them a sense of **empowerment** and the necessary energy to make them capable of **demanding reparation, atonement and justice**".* This comment sets the stage for the rest of the interview.

Even though it was received with little public attention, Yesterday and Today is important because it is a **testimony** of what happened to people during the Peruvian civil war. As Roberta Bacic noted: *"It is a fact that will not permit any variables from 'external or internal' forces. The imprint or essence of the event endures; we cannot compromise the recognition of what's been said, which has a very strong value in itself. What is also interesting from a historical perspective, is that it's an irrefutable testimony of the women's true experiences...The textile creation is a way to respond to the world we live in, a way of **leaving an imprint**".*



Detail of the Peruvian tapestry. Picture by Colin Peck.

The actual **manual labour** of producing quilts *"allows these women to express experiences that are difficult or impossible to communicate with words. It permits them to cross language and cultural barriers with people from other cultures and languages. The process of making textile art gives women time to themselves, allowing them to shed pain with their stitches. You knit at your own rhythm, or the rhythm of your group. It is **therapeutic** to be able to express feelings in cultures where pain and suffering is not much spoken of. Many cultures don't openly express personal or social suffering and pain is considered a private matter. In Peru it is relatively private. You do not share all personal things with everyone. The arpillera thus becomes a vehicle of expression in a public way, helping the makers to go on with living in their often dire circumstances"*.

Through Roberta Bacic, *Yesterday and Today* has become widely known in Western Europe and Latin America. It all started with an invitation from the Relatives for Justice organisation to participate in the West Belfast Festival in 2006.

The West Belfast Festival is an annual August event of the Republican Catholic community in Northern Ireland. The festival was created as a way to celebrate its culture in spite of the long conflict that tore the country apart. Little by little, the Festival began offering cultural activities, exhibitions, debates and other programmes of education and entertainment<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> For further information: <http://www.feilebelfast.com>



In 2004 Roberta Bacic was invited to present a photographic exhibition of the plight of Chilean women and their families, which she had previously organised. The medium was photos of memorials in Chile<sup>5</sup>. The display focussed on how the women dealt with their experiences, not dwelling on the atrocities themselves. She gave a **presentation** on the **testimony of their life experiences** and the **implications for survivors**.

By then the **Relatives for Justice** had created some of their own remembrance **quilts**. Each of eight quilts they have completed is made up of 49 squares, each memorialising a relative lost in the conflict. The squares were put together in a grand quilt. Each is a moving reminder of the great loss this community has had to face<sup>6</sup>. At the time of this interview, the group had begun work on a ninth quilt.

Roberta Bacic: *"The significance of Yesterday and Today in relation to the Northern Ireland experience is that it expresses and illustrates ordinary women's common experience of violence during conflict. In Northern Ireland women on both sides of the conflict are affected and both express loss and emotion. It is not often seen the pain/loss of the other side of the conflict. Perhaps, some day, we can unite the artists and creators of all these arpilleras/quilts from around the world"* .

Putting this idea into practice was long and complicated. The Peruvian arpillera, entrusted to Roberta by Gaby Franger, was first exhibited in the West Belfast Festival, as described. It was later exhibited alongside an arpillera made while in hiding to save her life by Guadalupe Ccallocunto Olano<sup>7</sup>. Along with these two works were *the Remembrance Quilts* of the Relatives of Justice.

After the Belfast festival, Roberta decided to take the arpillera abroad on every occasion that she could. *"It didn't feel right to have it stay in only one place,"* she said. Since then, she has **toured** with Yesterday and Today to more than 35 places, among them Guatemala, Germany, Spain and the Republic of Ireland. It has been displayed in public places, at political events and in academic, artistic, historic, social – and sometimes, controversial – venues.

Detail of the Peruvian tapestry by Colin Peck



Roberta compares caring for this arpillera to caring for a son or daughter. When she had to return it to Germany, where it belongs and now remains, she delivered it personally. *"It was like letting go of a child"*.

During the time that Roberta was taking the arpillera to different places in the world, she collected other examples of textile art given to her as tokens of appreciation. These included Colombian patchwork, a cell phone (mobile phone) holder and the Amish Quilting Pack, among others. She included these in one of the major exhibitions she curated.



Alba: When closing, I asked her how she thinks the Peruvian *arpilleristas* will "quilt" the **future**. She believes that these women will have a "sure footing" on reality. They never imagined how far their creation would go. The sad commentary is, despite their impact, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has not yet implemented any of the measures it promised to them.

<sup>5</sup> For further information: *Memory and memorials from Chile: 30 years since the military coup*. <http://www.wri-irg.org/photo/index-en.htm>

<sup>6</sup> For further information: *The Remembering Quilt*. <http://www.relativesforjustice.com/pages/28/Remembering-Quilt.html>

<sup>7</sup> For further information: *The corner of the dead: Ayacucho, Perú*, <http://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=57>



### Final Reflections:

As we have seen, *arpilleras* have become a **medium of communication, expressing a personal** as well as **collective** experience and becoming inseparable from social, political, economic and cultural reality. Quilting has become a language, devoid of written speech. The quilts are timeless and inter-generational. They are a way of communicating between cultures, a fundamental expression of the unspoken truth.

In the same way, the *arpilleras* allow us to recognise different forms of artistic expression used by women. It also gives us an opportunity to observe the variety of materials used the designs, and the life they depict.

Yesterday and Today in particular, has come to symbolise an expression of social reality, defying efforts to hide any wrongdoing by the perpetrators of injustice, torture and murder.

In addition, it has allowed us to hear about creative women who have used a **non-violent language**, thread and needle, to tell their own stories – a language that requires no words. When this *arpillera* was taken before the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a group testimony, it was a way of testifying what the *arpilleras* had been through, claiming a **space** to try to tell and clarify their **truth**. Perhaps the message did not get the social recognition it sought in its own country, but the message we get is one of an important collaboration of women who overcame their differences in a common aim. They came together to share their individual story in order to weave a group story. This created a bridge for dialogue which shows us it is possible to **work together** – and eventually, to contribute to **reconciliation and peace**.



Photo taken by Gaby Franger, in the headquarter of the Kuyanakuy organisation, Pamplona Alto, Peru.



## Bibliography:

### Books:

Agosin, Marjorie. Foreword by Isabel Allende (1996). *Tapestries of hope, threads of love*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

*The art of survival. Fabric images of women's daily lives*. Frauen in der einen welt, Tara. Germany, 1995.

Zeitlin Cooke, Ariel; MacDowell, Marsha. *Weavings of war: fabrics of memory*.

### Websites:

Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance. An introduction by Eliana Moya-Raggio

<http://www.jstor.org/view/00463663/sp040025/04x0891g/0>

When art loses its sting: the evolution of protest art in authoritarian contexts. Jacqueline Adams, University of California at Berkeley:

<http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/pdf/10.1525/sop.2005.48.4.531>

Art in Social Movements: Shantytown women's Protest in Pinochet's Chile. Jacqueline Adams.

<http://www.springerlink.com/index/AUEDPMADPP86YFTW.pdf>

Narraciones en un tapiz: "Tres Marías y una Rosa". Marjorie Agosin, Wellesley College:

<http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/pdf/10.1525/sop.2005.48.4.531>

Telling the story: power and responsibility in documenting Human Rights Violations:

[http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/Telling\\_the\\_Story/agosin.html](http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/Telling_the_Story/agosin.html)

Srebrenica Memorial Quilt Unveiled. The advocacy Project:

<http://us.oneworld.net/article/view/151170/1/?PrintableVersion=enabled>

San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textile. Textile exhibits explore themes of war and patriotism.

22/03/07: [http://www.sjqquiltmuseum.org/press\\_releases/Summer\\_07\\_Release.pdf](http://www.sjqquiltmuseum.org/press_releases/Summer_07_Release.pdf)

Woven Witness: Afghan War Rugs. From the collection of Patricia Markovich.

<http://www.sjqquiltmuseum.org/exhibitions.html>

Carpet bombing. Victims of war from around the world tell their stories in rugs and weavings at the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, By Steve Hahn:

<http://www.metroactive.com/metro/08.08.07/weavings-of-war-0732.html>

War rugs: <http://www.warrug.com>

### Movies:

**How to make an American quilt. (1995).** Director: Jocelyn Moorhouse. Actores: Winona Ryder, Anne Bancroft. Based on the bestseller by Whitney Otto.

**Scraps of life.** (Chile) 28 min. Produced by Gayla Jamison and based on the book of Marjorie Agosin.

### Short film:

**Como alitas de chincol**, by the Chilean filmmaker Vivienne Barry. Artemia Films, Santiago de Chile.