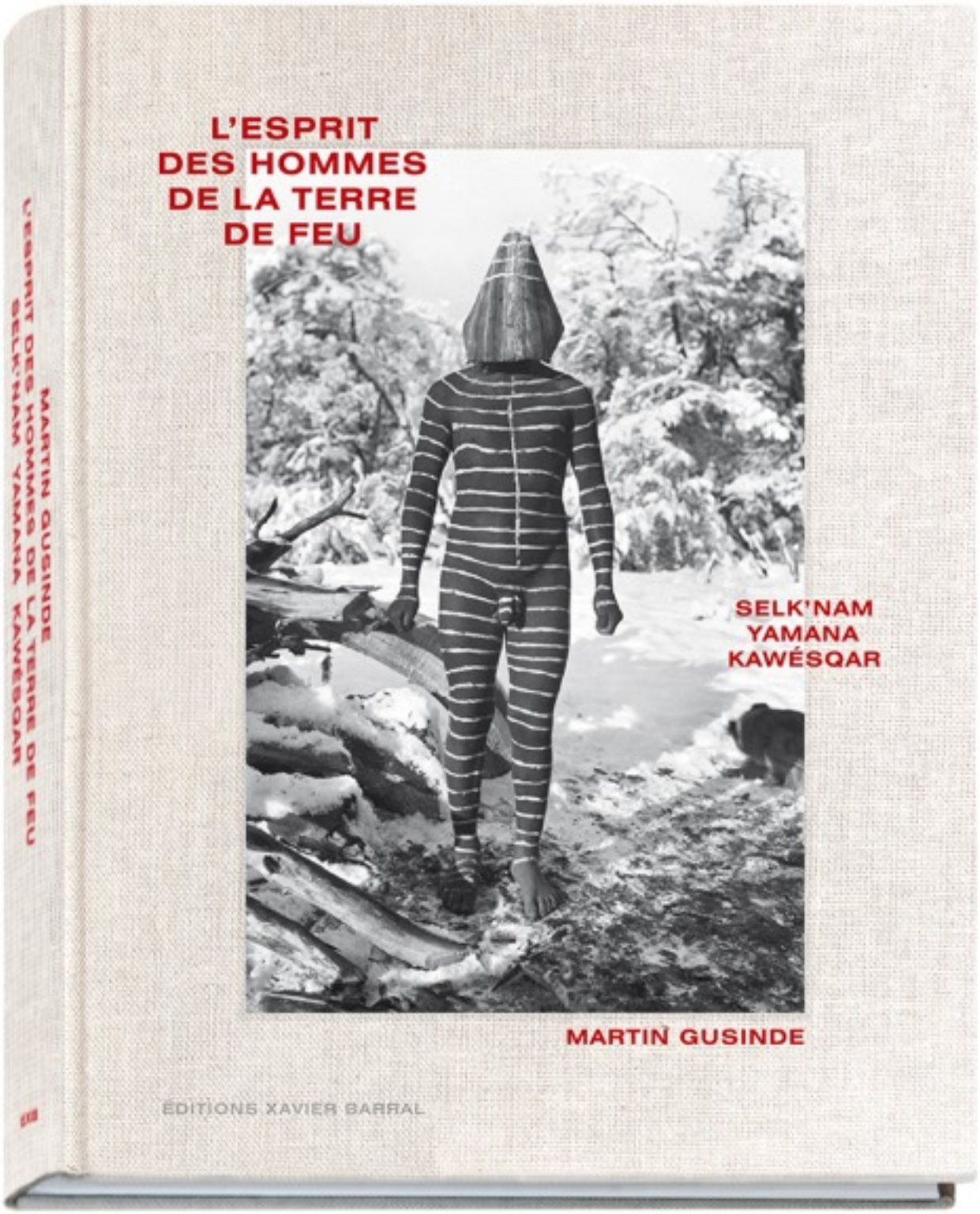
Playing Spirits

Between 1918 and 1924, the German missionary and anthropologist Martin Gusinde traveled to Tierra del Fuego and West Patagonia, the southernmost point in Chile and therefore the globe. Alma Mikulinsky writes about the traveling exhibition of Gusinde's photographs, documenting his encounter with the indigenous people of the Selk'nam, the Yamanas and the Kawésquar.

Critique / Alma Mikulinsky February 3, 2017

GUSINDE_COUV_3D.jpg



[1]

Between 1918 and 1924, the German missionary and anthropologist Martin Gusinde conducted multiple trips to the southernmost point in Chile and therefore the globe, Tierra del Fuego and West Patagonia, locations that are known for their harsh living conditions and extreme climate. In his travels Gusinde encountered the indigenous people of three groups: the Selk'nam, the Yamanas and the Kawésquar and documented them with his camera. This resulted in a famed body of work

consisting of 1200 negatives, which are housed today at the Anthropos Institute de Sankt Augustin [2] in Germany. A newfound interest in Gusinde resulted in the “discovery” of this body of work by the French publisher Xavier Barral, who had compiled it into a luxurious catalogue, and the 2015 exhibition [3] during the photography festival Les recontres de la photographie at Arles, France. This led to a tour of 150 photographs by Gusinde in the region during 2016-2017, which began in Ushuaïa Argentina and then arrived to Chile's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes [4] in Santiago - the country’s most established art space.

The exhibition was organized by, the publisher Barral and the French curator Christine Barthe, curator of the photographic collections of Musée Quay Branly [5] in Paris. The show’s declared agendum is twofold, as it sets out to reveal this body of work for its aesthetic value, as well as to educate about the culture and heritage of these Fuegian ethnic groups, whose societies, myths, and languages have either almost disappeared or went completely extinct since the area’s colonization by Chilean and Argentinian governments during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

P245_Esprit_YincihauaJPG.jpg **[6]**



[7]L’esprit Yincihaua et son masque phallique.
Kawésqar, 1919-1924

© Martin Gusinde / Anthropos Institut / Éditions Xavier Barral

As he was beginning his career as a missionary, Gusinde also became a professional anthropologist, working at the ethnographic museum in Santiago de Chile for almost a decade, and eventually gaining his doctorate from the University of Vienna. The photographs he took invite one to think about the traditional role of photography in the service of scientific missions and, more specifically, the place that photography occupies in anthropological studies. This body of work serves as an example of the field’s methodological shift, which took place at the beginning of the 20th century, a shift caused by simultaneous changes in the discipline’s definition: the rise of photography as a scientific tool went hand in hand with the growing popularity of fieldwork as a preferred method of study; a marked shift from the study of collections to the field, from objects to subjects, and from external expertise to insiders’ knowledge and lived experience.1 Photography thus became the preferred tool for capturing anthropological data while out in the field, leading, as the photographs in the exhibition show, to the creation of a variety of documentary and taxonomic techniques that highlight the medium’s claim for truthfulness of depiction – be it in the representation of habitats, costumes, or different individuals of these societies.

As some studies show, most notably Elizabeth Edwards’ writing on photography and anthropology,2 things were not so straightforward. And indeed the best moments in the “Los espiritos de la Patagonia” exhibition are precisely those pictures that offer an insight into the constructed nature of documentary photography and reveal the artificiality of the situation that is anthropological fieldwork, including photographs where Gusinde, with his round glasses and European clothes, has painted his face in a similar manner to his informants, who are photographed next to him. This context suggests that he did not attempt to completely immerse or assimilate himself into the cultures he was observing, but rather was consciously role-playing.

P242_Esprit_YincihauaJPG.jpg **[8]**



[9]L’esprit Yincihaua couvert de blanc d’os broyé.
Kawésqar, 1919-1924

© Martin Gusinde / Anthropos Institut / Éditions Xavier Barral

Gusinde’s most important contribution to the study of the Fuegian cultures of Tierra del Fuego and West Patagonia was his documentation of the “Hain” initiation ceremony of the people of Selk’nam, a ritual typified by inherent theatricality and make-belief. This ceremony, initiating young boys into adulthood, could last up to five years; Gusinde participated and documented the last Hain ceremony to have taken place, a shorter version that had lasted 50 days. According to the anthropologist Anne Chapman, who has written the seminal study on the Hain and has used Gusinde’s photographs as her visual material, this ceremony was “at once a male initiation rite, a means of disciplining women, and the main focus of social intercourse and a religious observation.”3 The Hain included multiple parts and consisted of different tasks and tests, which required the young adults to overcome their fear by demonstrating courage and resourcefulness. In one important part, the founding myth of their society was re-enacted for the boys: they would be taken into a dark hut, where they would be attacked by what they believed were evil and harmful spirits. The children would then be taught that these evil spirits were actually men of their tribe, in costume. Following this revelation the children would then dress themselves up as the same spirits and return to their homes to continue the Hain, this time as its performers.

The photographs of the Hain ritual, the crown jewel of Gusinde’s work, operate on multiple levels and go beyond the mere documentary tool anthropologists have imagined photography to be. This becomes especially evident when depicting the Hain ritual described above; Gusinde’s photographs reveal the ritual’s complex nature, explicate its mythical roots, highlight its threatening qualities, and expose the ritual’s inherent theatrical nature. One photograph depicts two bored boys waiting outside the hut for the action to start, while another shows the behind-the-scenes preparations for the ritual, where men are in the process of dressing up as spirits. Many other images show the wide array of costumes representing different characters and figures, such as Shoort, who terrifies the women and tortures the young, posing in front of the camera and its operator. When reenacting the ritual in front of the camera, the photographs mirror the multilayered nature of the ritual, its shifting between make-belief and reality, and between audiences with different access to information: those who are in the know - the men who dress and act as the spirits, and the outsiders - the women and children who believe they are threatened by spirits.

P247_chamanJPG.jpg **[10]**



[11]Chaman.
Kawésqar, 1919-1924

© Martin Gusinde / Anthropos Institut / Éditions Xavier Barral

Unfortunately, this complex approach to photography as a documenting and staging tool does not carry over to the work of the three contemporary artists included in the show. These artworks were intended to bridge the decades since Gusinde had taken his photographs, to contextualize and to give voice to these indigenous people in the present. The works by Paz Errázuriz, Leopoldo Pizarro, and Gabriela Alt take a non-critical approach to documentary photography, which results in dull works in comparison to Gusinde's oeuvre. The famed Chilean photographer Errázuriz produced a series entitled "Nomades del Mar," consisting of stern portraits of elderly Yamanas and their harsh living conditions, while Alt's film pays homage to the lost knowledge of Yamanas culture with a long, step-by-step "how-to" guide to the construction of a canoe. The three artists seem to borrow the logic of scientific photography and operate under its conventions and its claim for veracity of depiction, despite the fact that it had been contested even as early as in Gusinde's time.

Los Espiritus de la Patagonia: Selk'nam, Yagán y Kawésquar. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes [4], Santiago de Chile, October 19 - December 18, 2016; Museo Martin Gusinde in Puerto Williams, January 12 - March 31, 2017; Museo Regional de Magallanes, Punta Arenas, June- July 2017; and three other venues throughout Chile.

- 1. Wilfried Van Damme, "Siberian Ornaments, German Scholars, and a Transitional Moment in the Anthropology of Art, c. 1900," Art History, 38.3, June 2015, p512-535.
- 2. Elizabeth Edwards, [12]Raw Histories: Photography, Anthropology, and Museums *[12].* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001)
- 3. Anne Chapman, [13]Drama and Power in a Hunting Society: The Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego *[13].* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 149.

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