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From Kisses to Megalomaniacal Strategies of Demonstrations on the Streets

In the past few years, Chile has seen renovated forms of demonstration and protest. With the occupation of public space – both physical and virtual – social movements have used creative and poetic practices to disrupt public order. These movements want to question the neoliberal model implemented during the dictatorship, which recent governments have only intensified, also increasing the pressure of the neoliberal system and the tendencies of globalization.

An important feature in these renovated demonstrations and protests is the adoption of resources, strategies and aesthetics borrowed from advertising, film, and pop culture in general, along with the use of technology and media.

This text will show some of the most representative examples of these actions, trying to understand them within their specific political context and symbolic dimension, also tracing their connections to conceptual practices carried out in Chile in the seventies and eighties.

When we want to build a genealogy of the occupation of public space through poetic or artistic experiences, we have to look beyond what art history books have habitually taught us about Chile. Because the most innovative experiments that connect creativity with public space are rarely generated by artists coming from the academic salons of fine art. It is rather the architects, designers, and poets who have played a major role.

In his book *Psychomagic*, Alejandro Jodorowsky explains how, around the 1950s, Chile was a country where poetry was at the heart of cultural expressions. Poetry not only appeared in texts and declarations, but it was also part of a playful, surreal, and bohemian spirit that manifested in daily life.

“Poetry permeated everything: teaching, politics, culture life... The country itself lived immersed in poetry. This was due to the temperament of the Chileans and in particular the influence of five of our poets, who were transformed for me into archetypes. These poets were the ones who molded my existence from the beginning. The most well known of them was no less than Pablo Neruda, a politically active man, exuberant, very prolific in his writing and who, above all, lived like an authentic poet” (Jodorowsky, 2010, p. 13)

At the beginning of the fifties, before an artist such Richard Long made *A Line Made by Walking*, Jodorowsky and another poet Enrique Lihn were inspired by a futurist manifesto which declared art to be “poetry in action.” They decided to put this calling in practice. Here is Jodorowsky again:

“Lihn and I decided one day to walk in a straight line, without ever wavering. We walked down the avenue, and we came to a tree. Instead of going around it, we climbed up and over it; if a car crossed in our path, we climbed onto, walking on its roof. In front of a house, we rang the doorbell, entered through the door and exited where we could, sometimes through a window. The important thing was to maintain the straight line and not pay any attention to an obstacle, as if it did not exist.” (Op.cit, p. 15)

In this context took place one of the first interventions in the public space in which a link was established between a political critique and a common visual and textual experience. It was called *Breakbones*. Nicanor Parra, Lihn, and Jodorowsky developed some kind of wallpaper with extracts from newspapers. Based on the old “Lira Popular” (Lira – five line stanza) which circulated from approximately 1860 to 1920. “Lira Popular” consisted of paper sheets with poetry in ten line stanzas (a metered structure). The Lira also had etchings which accompanied the texts and commented on daily life and politics. They were sold on the streets hanging on a string.

Breakbones consisted of collages made from newspapers which were strategically placed on street corners in downtown Santiago. They were loaded with heavy doses of absurdist humor and social satire.

For Nicanor Parra the *Breakbones* experiments had no ideological message:

“It produced a significant release of big amounts of energy. In that sense it was related to physics. Something very mysterious happened, but it wasn't irony, or anything previously established. We managed to propose a critical examination of the rules that sustain language and the spiritual functioning. We made fun of reasoning.” (Piña, 1993)

Years later, in the midst of the dictatorship, the theoretician Ronald Kay brought *Breakbones* back into the daylight. They immediately began to take precedence over other techniques that were being developed in the dictatorial context. In a 1975 issue of the Manuscripts Magazine, *Breakbones* stood out, especially from the perspective of the recent historical events, as part of the need to recover a public space kidnapped by the dictatorship.

Kay offered a series of keys to understanding *Breakbones* starting with a multifaceted analysis of many aspects. He did not limit his writings to a linear form. Instead he tried to distance himself from the

traditional essay and the dominant structural criticism of the day and went ahead constructing an experience based upon poetic fragments, inserting photographic negatives, diagrams, maps, etc. He was mixing the descriptions and concepts that made up the lexicon of the artistic practice (like “impression” and “inscription”). As such, Kay inaugurated a way of writing that would transform the characteristic style of Chilean critical thought in the years to come. Similarly, and like other artists of the time, despite working from a certain political position, they would explore methods of production that would avoid a one-dimensional reading.

Walter Benjamin wrote a fundamental text that sustains that commentary: “The Author as Producer”. It was written in 1934 in the middle of tremendous political tension. According to the text, which would later be transformed into *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* of 1936, politics in art has nothing to do with the literal or explicit content of a work. Politics in art has more to do with the position of the artist in the canonical structure of aesthetics. This is to say that the artists’ socio-political role has more to do with the use of the means of production at hand. From that perspective, Benjamin says, politics is a call to step beyond disciplinary limits, and question what belongs to art, what belongs to science and what belongs to philosophy.

In this “Benjaminian” sense, the strategic aesthetic disruptions, which came from a literary or poetic origin, strengthened in the seventies and eighties as a means for ideological political struggle. This battle would be waged in visual arts in relation to other disciplines and practices like sociology, journalism, graphic design, theater, etc. Creative artists working together and also individually would explore a neo-vanguardist vein that would make an attempt to update the call to merge art and life.

The Body as a Sign of Resistance

As we all know, the military coup d'etat of September 1973 not only disrupted a socialist project, but also took the opportunity to install a revolutionizing economic model (Lavín, 1987; Moulian, 1996). Torture, disappearance, and the annulment of individual liberties were all so-called “persuasive” methods used to impose this model with a ferocity never seen until then.

Confronted with a State that, without exception, repressed expressions of political dissidence, and suffocated traditional democratic tools like marches, strikes, union negotiations, elections, political parties, etc. Various social actors – artists, writers, poets, and intellectuals – were obligated to experiment with new ways of expression.

In commemoration of the day of the female worker, March 8, 1978, the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (the association that dealt with missing relatives) held a public event featuring a folk music band. It was the first time the “Cueca Sola” was performed in this context. The cueca is a typical Chilean folkloric dance performed by a couple with twists and turns, and the rapid flurry of a white handkerchief; like a game of mutual seduction being played out. The Cueca Sola was initially a song. It was the title of a song by Gala Torres, who introduced the lament and the protest into these types of compositions.

In her song she spoke of a love lost:

En un tiempo fui dichosa apacibles eran mis días, mas llegó la desventura perdí lo que más quería.
Me pregunto constante, ¿dónde te tienen? Y nadie me responde, y tú no vienes.
Y tú no vienes, mi alma, larga es la ausencia, y por toda la tierra pido conciencia.
Sin ti, prenda querida, triste es la vida.”
—“Cueca sola”, Gala Torres. (Rojas-Sotoconil, 2009, p. 6)

[There was a time when my days were joyous and peaceful, but disgrace came to my life and I lost what I loved most. I constantly ask myself: where are they holding you? And I get no response. And you don't come back. You don't come back, my soul, your absence lingers on and on. I go warning everywhere to be aware. Without you, my dear, life is so sad.]

Her song demanded a crucial change in the method of performing this typical dance. For this reason, that day at the Caupolicán Theater, the association of missing relatives (AFDD) took one of their own members to the stage, Gabriela Bravo, to dance the cueca without her partner. Her husband had been detained by the military. Her solitary dance deconstructed each one of the elements in the traditional structure of the dance. Her body portrayed his absence in a dramatic and ritualistic way. The handkerchief that was once an element of flirtation and joy appeared transformed into a symbol of sadness; a cloth to wipe away tears. The solitary dance extended through a continuum of time in the hope that it might never end, a continuum in which mourning could not be completed until the disappeared bodies were finally found.

La Cueca Sola became a protest that, when it eluded censorship, succeeded in transcending other spaces and crossing national boundaries, sensitizing the population and informing them poetically about what was happening in Chile.

Something similar happened in Argentina, where an image of a woman displaying the photograph of her disappeared loved one on her chest became a symbol of demands for justice. The body had become a structure, like a picture frame, to portray absence.

In 1979, the artist Elías Adasme was told of the shooting and subsequent disappearance of two of his friends. The news was a great shock. Until that moment, his artistic efforts fitted comfortably within traditional frameworks. However, from that point onwards, he decided to produce a non-conformist art.

"Quería transmitir la rabia, que mi arte fuera una respuesta a lo que vivía. También quería que ese arte trascendiera la contingencia política y tuviera un lenguaje universal", cuenta. (Adasme & MAC, 2002)

[I wanted to transmit my rage, and my art was a response to what I was living. I also wanted my art to transcend political realities to reach a universal language].

At that moment he took to the street. He grabbed a map of Chile, and hung it outside of the underground station Salvador, in downtown Santiago. He then hung himself upside down next to the map, wearing only shorts. His actions condensed a series of micro-strategies of representation that disobeyed the idea of normality which had been imposed through repression and the silencing of the people. At the same time, he offered direct allusions to the national mood. The choice of Salvador station referred to the deposed socialist president, Salvador Allende. His inverted and semi-nude body represented the humiliation imposed upon many people.

"I used my body as a metaphor for the body of Chile, a repressed and vulnerable body," (op.cit)

Adasme said that the project was an attempt at a "project that aspired to document through art the moments of a period and its reality, without abandoning a universal metaphoric language."

This performance was quickly staged, including the taking of the photo, so as not to invite immediate attention.

"I hung upside down from the underground sign post with the map of Chile to my left, and when I looked towards the stairway to the station, I saw a handful of cadets from the Military Academy emerging. My accompanying group and a small group of other people froze in tension. I thought I was going to end in jail one more time. But the cadets looked at me, and they looked perplexed, as if to ask themselves, 'what is that?' Until finally they broke the silence, and cackling in laughter, one told the rest: 'man, that (shit) is an ad for jeans,' after which they all left. Of course, the only thing I was wearing was an old pair of jeans.' (Reyes, 2013)

This anecdote demonstrated the incapacity of the dictatorship to read the least conventional political art, a practiced that merged the conceptual with contextual aspects. The employment of hermetic poetic tools not only favored the renewal of an artistic language in Chile, but also allowed for it to survive.

The body became a political gesture used by artists as it provided new possibilities for insubordination. Torture, detention, and assassinations by the State were a silent threat. They were terrifying realities that some people refused to acknowledge, and that the press regularly omitted. But these clandestine whispers of denunciation spoke of something else.

These tacit expressions took diverse and complex forms. The artist Carlos Leppe began to develop performances in alternative gallery-like spaces that brought together a whole generation of intellectuals and artists. In one of his video-performances, *Las Cantatrices* (1980), as part of the exhibition *Sala de Espera* [Waiting Room], he displayed his disguised body while he sang opera. It was a clear response to mainstream media which had decided that "culture" consisted of foreign makeup that ignored the country's reality, and had to ignore traditional peasant and urban culture unable to adapt to the canon of the politically correct. Leppe interpreted an aria – a symbol for the snobbish pretensions of the Chilean upper class. But, his face is tensioned by a prosthesis that prevents him from closing his mouth; an allusion to the tools of torture.

Leppe worked in a modality of conceptual art from a situated perspective (a concept taken from the theoretical writings of Donna Haraway). This is to say, his performance exposed a separation from the solipsism and formalism of many European conceptualists everytime his aesthetic strategies were deeply connected to the national political reality and to Chilean idiosyncrasies. In 1978, Leppe performed, *Edición de un signo cutáneo* which involved shaving his head in the shape of a star/comet identical to the tonsure George Zayas practiced on Marcel Duchamp in 1919 and also photographed by Man Ray. Leppe was dressed in white behind the Chilean flag and substituted the national star by his shaved head. Leppe had appropriated the Duchampian linguistic-conceptual gesture and placed it in a local context. On the one hand it was an allusion to the utilization of patriotic symbols by the dictatorship, and on the other hand he highlighted the connections and separations between art hegemonically validated by Europe and the United States, and that of countries in the third world.

Similarly to those Viennese artists who whipped themselves as a desperate answer to the conservatism of their time, or Vito Acconci, who converted the video camera lens into a witness to his humiliations and self-cutting, in Chile, the poet Raúl Zurita read his texts whilst sprinkling ammoniac in his eyes. On the cover of his book, *Purgatorio*, published in 1979, he burnt his left cheek as a protest against the abuses carried out by the dictatorship. That same year he masturbated in public space at the Galería Cal. "No puedo más," or "I can't hold it anymore" was the title he gave to that performance. The insubordination to social restraints were largely inflicted upon the body as a complete entity, including its secrets and secretions, its pain and its uncontrolled libido.

Pain Zones

A few years later, applying the same logic involving sex and death, the writer Diamela Eltit got down on her knees and cleaned the floors of a brothel. Once inside the brothel, she cut her arms and legs with a pocket-knife whilst reading fragments of her novel *Por la Patria (In the name of fatherland)*. The action invited the attention of neighbors, artists, and prostitutes at the brothel. "Her body effectively became a scapegoat and a sacrificial body as she conscientiously burnt her arms and carried out her work with lacerated arms." (Galaz & Ivelić, 2009, p. 217) In this way, the artist replicated on her body the flagellation that, to that date, had been inflicted to many Chileans in detention centers. At the same time, her presence in a brothel drew a symbolic line between the different layers of social stratification. In general, her literary work has attempted to access the collective imagination of marginalized territories. On this occasion, her commitment to the abject and marginal form of life was carried out upon her own flesh in an attempt to distance herself from the traditional artistic world represented by galleries and museums. As a result, she introduced a concept of representative art within a live experience.

Along the same lines, the performance *Trabajo de amor con un asilado de la hospedería Santiago* [Love Work With an Immate of Santiago's Guest Quarters] carried out by the group CADA in 1982 consisted of passionately kissing with a tramp. As Diamela explains it, "there was a tramp, a crippled who I had met in one of these premises...So what I did was to film a scene of a kiss, a silver-screen kiss." (Morales T., 1998, p. 167). The implication of closeness to the other could be interpreted as subversive, not only with respect to the separation of a client and a prostitute, but also to class divisions in Chile that grew steadily during the military dictatorship. "For Eltit, the outcast symbolizes the resistance to the system as a force that could destroy that system." (Juan Andrés Piña, revista APSI en 1983, en anexo 67 Ivelic & Galaz, 1988).

Diamela's artistic practice, based on her own experience, works off from a representation of daily life seen from a feminist perspective. In that sense, it attempts to dismantle the assumed conventions of gender, race, and social class.

"Erizada de sexualidad, en la misma disolución yo poso de otro modo entre hombres y mujeres que posan más allá de las galerías, en una práctica que nadie me podrá desmentir por cuanto es mi forma de articulación, mi manera de vida" (Colectivo Acciones de Arte, Ruptura, 1982, p. 6)

[Bristling with sexuality, at the heart of dissolution, I pose my body in a different way, between men and women who put themselves beyond art galleries. This is a practice that cannot be denied by anyone else. For it's my mode of articulation, it's my way of living.]

Are you Happy?

The dictatorship left painful marks on the physical and social body of society. Those who were not subject to physical pain (torture or disappearance) or direct emotional pain (relatives of missing people) had to withstand in silence the repeated violation of their citizen rights, either fearfully or in complicity (as many of them had supported the dictatorship). The society went through an accelerated process of privatization of the institutions that had traditionally guaranteed health, housing, and education. No mechanisms for public participation in decision-making were made available. In the end, the streets had turned into a dangerous place.

In this context Alfredo Jaar, who was then only twenty-three years old and had recently dropped-out from architecture school, held one of his first public interventions, called *Studies on Happiness*, developed between 1979 and 1981. The work was based in the use of advertising panels. Each one had a text line that asked, "Are you Happy?" This was part of a greater effort that also included polls, personal interviews, portraits, and video installations.

His intention was to "make the street attractive, a public space once crossed with fear. It was as if to make the face of the spectator appear on screen (a new concept at the time) and by making them speak, take them out of that tradition of mute contemplation." (Valdés, A. 2006, p. 5)

The phrase was deployed in public spaces, squares, and highways. It was more than just a question. It could be understood as a subconscious message to a public that at the time was filled with fear, conformity, and indolence.

At the same time, the group Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (C.A.D.A) began to take shape. The multidisciplinary group was composed of the writer Diamela Eltit, poet Raul Zurita, artists Juan Castillo and Lotty Rosenfeld, and the sociologist Fernando Balcells. Together they produced a series of poetic-political actions that went against the core of the surveillance system put in place by the dictatorship. Their techniques were oriented towards refloating the principles and objectives of the historical avant-garde, linking art with life, and promoting the dissolution of disciplinary borders. They operated through the reappropriation and recuperation of public space, both in the streets and in the media.

Their first action, which took place in 1979, was called, *How to avoid dying of hunger in the art world*. It made use of several different stages and props. The first day they distributed a hundred half-liter bags of milk to poor neighborhoods in La Granja. The empty bags, which read "1/2 liter of milk," together with other bags in

varying states of decomposition, were held in a sealed box and then opened along with a photography exhibit of the milk distribution at the Centro Imagen gallery. The milk made reference to the Allende government's promise of giving each child half a liter of milk every day. The next day, this action was presented in a one-page publication in the front of *Hoy* news magazine with the following manifesto:

Imaginar esta página completamente blanca.
Imaginar esta página blanca accediendo a los rincones de Chile
como al leche diaria a consumir
imaginar cada rincón de Chile
privado del consumo diario de leche

(Neustadt & Colectivo Acciones de Arte, 2001, p. 15)

[Imagine this page completely blank
Imagine this blank page traveling to all corners of Chile
like the daily milk to be consumed
imagine each corner of Chile
deprived of their daily milk]

Along with this action, two weeks later they held another intervention, a so called "Inversion de Escena" "Inverted Scene". Eight trucks belonging to the milk company, Soprole drove through Santiago and parked in front of the National Museum of Fine Art. The entrance to the museum was then blocked by a hundred square meter cloth. A short while later, the company, to show its disapproval of the intervention, changed the design on their trucks.

Among intellectuals and artists, much of these works involved an exercise of simulation. They had to understand the bureaucratic jargon to achieve their objectives, and, at the same time, camouflage their true interests and objectives. Similarly, their theoretical writings also used a camouflage that allowed them to circulate without being detected by the censorship apparatus of the regime.

The group CADA was also involved in launching the "No+", or "No More" campaign, which was held in 1983, ten years after the military coup. This was a call to artists and creators to appropriate the symbol and use it actively. One of the pamphlets described the following:

"We have developed a slogan that has been displayed in murals, exhibitions, performance art, theater, music, etc. This slogan is No+. The invitation is extended to international artists to activate their own country's in the most appropriate way...This work began with the tenth anniversary of the military dictatorship, and we will keep it alive until the end of the dictatorship." (C.A.D.A, 1983: flyer)

The plus sign referred to another intervention by Lotty Rosenfeld held in 1979 called *A Mile of Crosses On Pavement*. It consisted of intervening in the traffic roadlines to generate a long string of white crosses. Since then, Rosenfeld has produced similar work in various countries and contexts. In that context, however, the crosses represented the absent tombs of missing people, also alluding to the mark made when voting, a right denied to the Chilean population.

No+ succeeded in having a transversal social impact and became the image of the political campaign that led to the ousting of Pinochet through the 1988 plebiscite.

I Can't Anymore

On November 11, 1983, the communist worker Sebastián Acevedo sprayed himself with kerosene and set himself on fire to demand the release of his children María Candelaria and Galo who had been taken captive by the state internal security apparatus (CNI). Within days of Acevedo's death, his children were freed. His decision revealed the power of the repressive organisms in the country. The radical and terrible act of Acevedo awakened the need to seek mechanisms for social organization that could present a common front to state violence. And so the Sebastian Acevedo Movement Against Torture was formed, along with the group Women for Life, formed by Mónica Gonzalez, Patricia Verdugo, María Olivia Monckeberg, and Marcela Otero. This last group brought together women photographers, politicians, and feminists in protest around the country. Their protests were called "lightning strikes" and were made up of symbolic civil disobedience in the streets. While they had no artistic pretensions, their actions were characterized by high levels of politics and ritual. The Acevedo movement, as well as the women movement, moved the attention towards the places where torture was taking place. This has precedent in the Argentine "funas" or "scraches", which have recently been brought back in the context of movements like M15 in Spain.

The women movement also realized actions like *La Cueca Sola* and produced songs and slogans using a variety of props. One of their first projects was titled *VIUDA [WIDOW]*(1985), carried out with Eltit and Rosenfeld, both CADA members, Gonzalo Muñoz, and Paz Errázuriz. It consisted of a photograph of a woman whose husband had been killed for "watching what was happening in his neighborhood," while a few blocks away a protest against the dictatorship was going on. (Neustadt & Colectivo Acciones de Arte, 2001, p. 56) Beneath the photograph the word 'VIUDA' was marked in capital letters along with an image of the following text:

Mirar su gesto extremo y popular
Prestar atención a su viudez y sobrevivencia
Entender a un pueblo

[Look at her extreme and common gesture
Pay attention to her widow-quality and her survival
Understand a community]

“We looked at the victims from the perspective of the survivor.” explained Lotty Rosenfeld, (op.cit, p. 54)

The use of a number of different props in mainstream media (heavily censored at that time) allowed for its massive dissemination throughout the city, but it also shifted the focus of the attention on the event. The consequences of the dictatorship did not end at the crimes committed, but were perpetuated by the sad silence of those who remained alive, which included some sectors heavily hit by poor communities.

Happiness is Coming (and Going)

The end of the dictatorship was a uniquely strange. It was the result of an agreement. Fundamental freedoms were regained, detention centers were eliminated, and democracy was restituted. But it came at the cost of maintaining authoritarian enclaves found in the political constitution created by the dictatorship which installed appointed senators in positions and postponed the basic demands of the people, something yet to be resolved. Not only did services and resources of the country stay in private hands, but the process of privatization continued. The restraints on the market for education and health-care were loosened, and there was a proliferation of high schools, universities, and private health-care services. Public institutions would improve, but slowly, as they were forced to handle the precarious situation of the poorer sections of society that increased as the society became less equal.

The gap between the poor and the rich would sharpen dramatically. This is the period called ‘the transition’. It is a word that has served as a placeholder to avoid the radical changes that the country needed. The concept of “trans” also recalls “transgenic” (the hybridization or genetic alteration of species), or “transvestite.” It was something like this that happened to our democracy. Politics became theater, filled with socialists injected with neo-liberal genes, and military coup architects dressing up as democrats. Let’s not forget that Pinochet was designated a senator-for-life.

But, it was just before the end of the dictatorship where we find the roots of the most transgressive work. It came from a certain sector that was marginalized from the official political circles, and who looked upon these changes with great suspicion.

In 1988, a collective called “Yeguas de Apocalipsis”, or “Mares of the Apocalypse”, was formed by a writer Pedro Lemebel and a poet, Francisco Casas. Both were homosexuals. Their work was oriented towards disrupting many topics that had seemed immune from criticism; shielded by the anti-Pinochet politicians who would later come together in an alliance called the ‘Concertación’.

One of their first interventions was held during a prize ceremony for the poet Raúl Zurita (mentioned earlier), who at that time was taking on the role as the official poet of the next government. The action was a coronation by thorns. The image of two naked “faggots” riding a horse, succeeded in disturbing a conservative left-wing that would have preferred to postpone gender issues and deny the existence of sexual diversity. Yeguas del Apocalipsis was a criticism of capitalism and its connection with social heteronormativity and patriarchy in a society still fearful of the military.

Another one of their important performances happened on October 12 at the opening of the Chilean Commission on Human Rights, entitled *Conquista de América* [Conquest of America] (1989). Dressed as Frida Kahlo, the two artists installed a map of Latin America covered with pieces of broken Coca-Cola bottles, and then, barefoot and with portable tape players fixed to their chest with tape, they performed a version of the “Cueca Sola.”

Clean Streets

Again in the ‘90s there was an attempt to regain the streets, but this time without politics. There was an open call to the community to take part in a “carnavalesque” exercise that had little if anything to do with the characteristic Chilean idiosyncrasy. It attempted to replicate the happiness of Brazilians, but through entombed bodies clumsily imitating the classic dances of Rio. Carnival and murga rhythms were an ad-hoc importation as part of the slogan “happiness is coming,” used during the plebiscite campaign in 1989. Batucadas and murgas replaced the massively attended marches, demanding justice.

Everybody without a doubt needed the superficiality of the party happiness, although it was much ado about nothing.

At the beginning of 2006, the streets would be taken again with the “pinguinos” [penguins]: high school students challenging authority. After years of apparent apathy, it was a surprising image to see young

people raising their voices with commitment and energy in public spaces, offering concrete proposals that moved big masses of students and startled the government of Michelle Bachelet. They decided go to the street because the situation of educational system was pushing to middle-class and poor families to collapse. Their first demands pursued specific demands regarding the reduction in price of the school transportation pass, due to the modification of the LOCE (The organic constitutional law of instruction) which had been passed four days before the end of the dictatorship and that gave education to hands of private system.

In formal talks, students, government officials, and teachers discussed possible changes to the education law. But after some time, these talks stalled and conversations fell upon deaf ears as officials systematically tried to undermine the students. In order to pacify the students, the government modified certain laws (LOCE por LGE), finally resorted to simple "patches" to tackle a much more serious situation within education. The structural reasons that generated excessive indebtedness among students – low quality of education and inequality – remained intact. At the same time, the media steadily gave less coverage to the student movements, and the image of student leaders was slowly replaced in the mainstream media with caricatures of whimsical youngsters. The news stopped giving airtime to student leaders and the screens filled with images of the more fringe Chilean youth subcultures: pokemones, goths, otakus and emo kids. As a fact, the media barely reflects realities, but it participates in the construction of the collective imagination. (I'm thinking of a documentary in which some North American gangsters from the fifties confessed that they dressed according to the gangsters as they were portrayed in films.)

And so in this way the press substituted the image of politicized youth with images of urban tribes. (While this effect maybe happens worldwide, the dimensions and velocity with which it happened in Chile was stunning.)

In Chile one can perceive a growing need to belong to a group; to be part of a collective trend (something repeatedly denied in dictatorship times). As an example, when the well-known photographer Spencer Tunick came to Chile in search of naked volunteers for his shots, being a conservative country, no one expected more than six hundred people to turn up in Santiago. Surprisingly, more than four thousand people came, in spite of the low winter temperatures.

The Little Giant Girl

In 2007, (January 25-28), the French theater company Royal De Luxe was invited as part of the subsidized theater festival called "Teatro a Mil". It consisted of two giant automatons, *The Hidden Rhinoceros*, and the *Small Giant*, which were paraded through the streets of Santiago. It was a success that attracted thousands of people, and counted on the support of the government, private enterprise, and the media. It accomplished several objectives as it compensated for the limited cultural depth of the government's policies for the general public with a widely seen spectacle broadcast through mainstream media. But it could also be seen as a "smooth manipulation of the masses", in words of the art critic Justo Pastor Mellado (2007), or as a method of redirecting the energy in the street that had begun to become particularly agitated because of the student demands. The company returned in 2010, a few months before the end of Michelle Bachelet's government, and the end of over two decades under the rule of the Concertación, a social-democratic coalition arrived...

Despite strong criticism of the Concertación and the image of Bachelet, the arrival of Sebastian Piñera, a member of the right-wing and Chilean business class, was not auspicious. The meme did not take long to appear, and the streets once again would be taken over by young people.

People in the streets wanted to play a real role, and there a few important markers of this new drive. One of the collective actions showed outstanding originality and precision: *Blondes for the Bicentennial Celebration*, performed by the University Collective for Sexual Dissidence – CUDS – on September 18, 2010. It was Chile's two hundredth anniversary of independence from Spanish colonial rule. The students offered to dye blonde the hair of anyone who wanted it, while they read a manifesto that denounced the classism tightly linked with the internalized racism in the country. So, it created the image of people dying their hair, a precarious and messy moment, while reading the following:

"To make yourself blonde isn't difficult, what is difficult is not being dark, because this oxygenated blonde isn't like ashes, but it is irregular and sometimes orange, an unreal tint, in this hair we see the failure of our brown hair so dark, so black, a possibility to clarify ourselves with these new colors, which placed against each other doesn't resolve anything, but instead proves why we are here like in a cheap hair salon, discolouring our hair beneath the blondour and 40-percent hydrogen peroxide, we end up all the same, and erase our differences, we produce our new names, our names that could be more if we changed our last names that bring us down we change the color of our blondness."(CUDS, 2010)

Megalomaniacs

Many years ago, a classmate who worked in publicity told me about her job as an adviser at a tourist stand in Southern Chile, Curicó. She told me a story of how she jokingly proposed, more out of boredom than anything else, to take advantage of the megalomaniacal fever invading the country and enter into the Guinness Book of World Records and make the "largest 'curicana' cake in the world." The idea to transform the iconic pastry of the region was enthusiastically received. The mayor contacted the owners of Tortas "Montero" (Only

a coincidence) and, after days of work and celebration, a grand event in a school gymnasium succeeded in presenting a tremendous pastry that was ten meters in diameter and nearly a meter high. The Guinness judges took their entry. My friend said that for a long time she held a piece of that cake, storing it in her freezer as if it were a piece of a meteorite or rubble from the Berlin Wall. Despite the surreal chauvinism surrounding these types of initiatives, it was an event that pulled the whole province together and was a real moment in citizen participation.

In those years, it was one of several experiences of the type that repeated themselves as a way of attracting attention. It promoted tourism and food, required citizen participation, and it involved the tinge of something totally delirious. In 1995 they made the largest "curanto" (a traditional regional dish where shellfish, meat, and potatoes are stewed in a fire pit and covered in earth to cook), the largest barbecue featuring two hundred and thirty-seven lambs being cooked over a kilometer and a half distance in the community of Licanray. That was 1995. A year later, it was the "paila marina", a shellfish stew. There was also the largest "pisco sour" ever made, which also took advantage of the experience to throw a few jabs at Peru, a country with which Chile competes for ownership of the drink. Two years after that was the largest pastel de choclo, a shepherd's pie-like dish based on corn, onion, and meat. It measured forty by forty-five meters and was produced in the small town of Maria Pinto.

In 1996, the obsession crossed over into artisanal crafts when a huge 'chaleco de la ligua' was made, a ten by seven and a half meter wool cardigan. The installation of objects in gigantic dimensions in the public space seemed to emulate the Swiss artist Claes Oldenburg. But, for some reason the act was able to pull the community together around common goals, in an environment characterized by a curious consumerism.

And so, taking advantage of this fetishistic impulse and pleasure in this gigantic monument, and the international exposure through the Guinness world records, students began to carry out a number of similar acts. Attempts were made to attract media attention simply through sheer magnitude. At the same time, it represented an attempt to regain subjective space, defying the control exercised by repressive forces and social conventions towards space and the behavior of bodies within it.

An academic survey showed that eighteen billion dollars was needed to cover the educational needs of three hundred thousand Chileans (at an average cost of six thousand dollars each.) The statistic triggered an idea among an assembly of theater students. They would run for one thousand eight hundred hours around the Moneda Presidential Palace to show that it could be done. Local media quoted one of the students, Diego Varas, as having stood up at the assembly and said, "well, I am afraid...but I still think this could work," and left the assembly hall running, leaving the group stunned. His classmates followed him running to La Moneda."(Perez Ruz & Contreras, 2011)

For two months they were running laps around La Moneda Palace, coordinating among volunteers to join the marathon. They also kept a counter showing the distance covered. More than two thousand people arrived to run, among them students, young people, old people, and children. Later, this initiative would spread to other cities.

The figure inspired other pursuits as well, giving rise to a "kiss-a-thon" in which thousands of students kissed for one thousand eight hundred minutes. Add this to the political fight and the seriousness of their petitions, physical awareness that for so long had been restricted by the dictatorship and domesticated by mass media. The kiss Diamela Eltit gave to denounce marginality and exclusion was updated as a libidinous gesture, and at the same time something festive and open to all.

In another distinctive action, thousands of young people wearing caps, swimming flotation devices, and dressed in bikinis and bathing trunks, approach the Education Minister at the time, Joaquin Lavín, to let him know that it would be best if he "took some holidays." Coupled with the rhetoric of mourning, elegies, and laments, this represented the appearance of bodies; bodies much less repressed than in previous generations. These were bodies that did not know of tortured flesh or running blood, still virgin to the policeman's baton. These bodies were not fearful in demonstrating the power of their libido as a revolutionary act.

It would continue in 2011 in Concepción, a large city in southern Chile. A phrase was written with the bodies of young people laying on the ground: "No More Profit," could only be read from the air. In Santiago they unfolded the largest flag in Chile (but they did not attempt to get it registered in the record books) and hung it inside a shopping mall located in a megalomaniacal building, the tallest in South America, called the Costanera Center, owned by one of the richest men in the country.

Like in the works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the central campus of the University of Chile disappeared beneath a gigantic drape emblazoned with the words "the University is not for sale." It was an allusion to the packaging of the product, a metonym for the market. Somehow, for most Chileans, everything has become a commercial product. Sebastián Piñera himself, in one of his famous lapses, said education was a "commodity".

Disobedient Images

Pop culture has filtered into politics. The concept of a meme has come to represent new ways of participation and technology. Initially coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, according to him memes are small parts of our culture that extend from person to person through copies and imitation. And so in the digital culture of web 2.0, we are participating in the rapid growth of these

phenomena. Why does a Youtube video like *Gangnam Style* – sung by the South Korean singer Psy – attract millions of online viewers? And even more so, why is it that so many people invest time and effort in spoofs of these videos? Last year we could see so many people dance to this idiotic dance – through digital effects or in real life – from presidents to celebrities, regular people and also the artist Ai Wei Wei, who found a way to use it to communicate his political situation.

Why is it that people produce these videos or photoshop images that are then shared by millions? What is the creative potential? What is the subversive potential?

The biological notion implicit in the concept of a “meme” is resemantized, making it more complex and tentacle-like, bridging a space between politics and entertainment that intersect and feed off of each other.

More than two decades have gone by since the anthropologist and cultural critic Néstor García Canclini alerted us in his book *Culturas Híbridas* (1990) to the convergence and exchange of areas that had once seemed separated: the popular or massive, folklore and cult have seen their borders blurred when confronted by consumerism, multiculturalism, and globalization, the market and the overwhelming unfolding of the media have revealed new social configurations, and most importantly new and even faster rates of exchange.

Although it may seem like a paradox, artistic-political productions and the market have also seen their borders relax. The construction of this idea works in both directions. The market uses certain icons of popular culture and dissidence. For example the energy drink called “Ché Energy” which features the face of Ché Guevara, and last year a German bank offered several different designs for their credit cards, one design featuring the figure of Karl Marx (a Marxtercard).

But the inverse also occurs. Dissidence and activism create visual elements (via appropriation or Photoshop) which are much easier to manipulate when you talk about the appropriation of images, texts, or languages printed in the public imagination through massive advertising campaigns.

One of my favorite examples happened after the rescue of the miners. President Piñera didn’t hesitate to show everyone where he was, the paper with the message wrote by one of the miners saying “we are alive, the 33 ones”. But soon, people reinterpreted this icon in very sardonic and funny ways. They are mostly anonymous people who, with very basic understanding of Photoshop and a dose of ingenuity, were able to channel criticism and discontent towards not only the president, but everything that he represented: the figure of a businessman and a politician.

Appropriation of Narratives from the Mainstream

In February 2010, a group of Palestinian peasants, activists, and members of the non-violent resistance, marched in the streets with their bodies painted blue. A pirated copy of the movie *Avatar* served the town of Bilin, near the Palestinian city of Ramallah, to represent their demands against the Wall (of Apartheid), thus identifying themselves with the Na’vi people in the movie. The protest drew attention from press in Israel and the world. This strategy taken lightly could be seen as a trivial parody, but it reclaimed the artistic purpose, understood not only as aestheticization of the political, but also a means to regain the relation between symbol and origin, between myth and history, between concept and action. Beyond criticism from any suspicious perspective we might have (the caricature of the aborigines –with their positive and negative discrimination- the idea of the hero; violence as the last resort) the appropriation of the film by this Palestinian community filled with historical sentiment the void that the current arts regime has created as it moved to an exclusively formal and aesthetic expression.

What happened in Palestine is something similar to what occurred throughout 2011 when Chilean students launched several protests loaded with creativity and imagination. One of the most memorable was a performance of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video in the middle of downtown Santiago. One of the phrases of Salvador Allende was, “Much sooner than later, the broad avenues will open through which the free man will pass to build a better society.” Allende probably never would have that thought that thirty-eight years after enunciating those words in his last public speech, a carnival of zombies marching along those streets would represent that free man. On June 26, 2011, more than three thousand university and high school students dressed as apparitions in torn clothing and painted faces carried posters and signs explaining how much money they would end up owing upon finishing their studies. “We are the living dead.” The action ended in a massive dance of zombies carried out to the choreography of the *Thriller* music video in the Plaza de la Ciudadanía in front of La Moneda. Son Goku, a main character from the series *Dragon Ball Z* also joined the student protests. From virtual social networks, through to the official Spanish voice dub of the series of Japanese animation, a call was made to raise their hands and gather energy to create a Genkidama (a ball of spiritual power). The appropriation of visual images was both a collective and an individual initiative. Nowadays we are used to seeing several characters of television or popular culture, marching on the streets: an old man dressed as Santa Claus; He Man, Caribbean pirates, Lady Gaga, and from 1996, the Ché of Gays.

Conclusions

Before this explosion of revolutionary and creative energy, it is worth noting the small amount of artists who have taken a role in this agitated context. Or maybe we think they have dispersed into the masses. One thing

seems certain: the power of conceptual actions performed during the seventies and eighties seems to live again in the superficiality of all that we live now.

One of the exceptions was the action "Sala Invertida": Students of art at the Valparaíso University hung chairs from the ceiling, placed the lights on the floor and wrote on the whiteboard a phrase of Guy Debord: "in a world that has really been turned upside down, truth is a moment of falsehood".

The last actions in which I could participate were in last September, for the fortieth anniversary of the dictatorship. An actress made a call via Facebook and Twitter to commemorate this sad date.

Over a thousand people lay down on the floor in the middle of Alameda, representing the scar left by the missing detainees and all the tortured and executed people in the years of the dictatorship; a scar that crossed the face of Chile.

There has always been a danger that these subversive strategies can become exhausted, that the corrosive potential of the political message is neutralized by the force of repetition, or that the socio-political issues become an aesthetic or artistic act hosted by those institutions that regulate them, like museums, gallery, art publications, academia (we can feel a bit guilty now...) But, we shouldn't feel too guilty, because the distribution in all these areas can serve as somewhat of a viral motor, disseminating strategies and tactical resources that reconcile humor, creativity, and emotion, inspiring other groups and ourselves with what we will soon be living.

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