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Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



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Performing Dissent in the Streets of Globalisation: The Right to the City

Philip Hager

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Performing Dissent in the Streets of Globalisation: The Right to the City

Philip Hager

School of Theatre, Faculty of Fine Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Abstract

My interest in this essay lies with practices that appear to embody or to enact claims to the right of the global-urban fabric by protesting different facets of neoliberal capitalism's violence and its counterparts: patriarchy, colonialism, ecological destruction. The main example I will be looking at is the activist performance *Un Violador en tu Camino (A Rapist in your Path)* by Chilean collective LASTESIS that was first performed in Valparaiso (2019) and was subsequently repeated in many cities around the globe. As neoliberal urbanisation strengthens inequalities and proliferates experiences of precarity, this performance creates spaces for female bodies and femininities; spaces where particular kinds of violence might be resisted. I propose a reading of this performance framed by Wendy Brown's call for a re-invigoration of radical politics away from "Left Melancholy" which inhabits spaces "not in hopefulness but in its marginality and failure" (Brown, 1999, p. 26). In this context I ask: *how might the performance intervention launched by LASTESIS rehearse a renewed right to urban life and in so doing show us a way out of Left Melancholy? What kinds of geographies and ecologies do such dissenting practices produce and inhabit?*

Keywords: LASTESIS, public performance, protest, neoliberalism, patriarchy

The Right to the City

In her 1999 essay *Resisting Left Melancholy*, Brown (1999) wonders "what is entailed in throwing off the melancholic and conservative habits of the Left to invigorate it with a radical (...) critical and visionary spirit again?" (p. 26). I begin with Brown's question as I am drawn to this idea of a re-invigoration of politics and the radical critical spirit this might include, but not as a way of shaking the "putative leftist" out of "a mournful (...) attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike" (1999, p. 21-2). Rather, what

interests me here is the way it engages with Stuart Hall's proposition that a radical critique to the neoliberal project needs to be intersectional. Twenty-five years after it was first posed, I return to Brown's question in a context where Friedman's argument that free-market capitalism ensures "co-ordination [between social agents] without coercion" (2002, p. 13) has become common sense – in many ways having instituted what Fukuyama called the end of history (1989). Arguments that, as Harvey has shown, disregard the effects of capital accumulation that turn the idea of freedom "into a mere advocacy of free market enterprise" (2005, p. 37). Arguments, moreover, that enable what Bourdieu calls "*institutionalized precariousness*" and the violence that produces it to become the dominant forces in social relations (2003, p. 29).

My aim here is to trace practices mapping a dissenting ecology that unmask the different facets of free-market capitalism's systemic violence; practices, moreover, that map an intersectional perspective and analysis. Such practices have emerged in response to the multi-faceted post-2008 crises and have, by and large, occurred beyond (or outside of) the institutionalised political project of the Left: the various local manifestations of the global wave of occupations of squares and other public spaces, for example, that took place between 2011-2013, but also more recent activist practices that seem to take shape around three different yet interrelated forms of violence exercised by globalised capitalism: patriarchal violence, colonisation and ecological destruction. Such practices claim their performers' rights to visibility, safety and participation in shaping our shared world – and they do so in public urban spaces. A central argument I will pursue, then, is that the practices shaping this ecology map globalization's discontents by claiming and re-invigorating the right to the (global-)city. The right to the city, Lefebvre writes, "is like a cry and demand" that "can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*" (1996, p. 158); or, as Harvey re-formulates it, as a cry for the "existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city" and a demand for a "less alienated, more meaningful and playful but (...) conflictual and dialectical" urban life (2012). This right is rehearsed through human needs, encounters and desires that do not rely on the political economies of neoliberal globalisation and their technocratic rationality.

In order to unpick certain aspects of this discussion I would like to focus on the public performance *Un Violador en tu Camino (A Rapist in your Path)* launched by Chilean collective LASTESIS in 2019.¹ I ask: *How might Un Violador en tu Camino rehearse a renewed right to urban life by devising and performing dissenting ways of inhabiting public*

¹ Other examples that may be included in this ecology are the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol or the direct actions of Just Stop Oil activists that use vandalism as political tool.

spaces again and anew? What “cries and demands” against globalisation’s violence does it stage? How might such practices rehearse aspects of a radical political project?

***Un Violador en tu Camino* – LASTESIS**

Conceived and staged by Chilean feminist collective LASTESIS in 2019, *Un Violador en tu Camino* was a participatory performance that aimed to demonstrate that patriarchal violence is “structural and organized” (Pinzauti, 2023, p. 152), by way of a song whose opening lines proclaimed: “Patriarchy is our judge/That imprisons us at birth/And our punishment/Is the violence you DON’T see” (Serafini, 2020, p. 291). Moreover, to enable participation, the performance included a simple choreography, using gestures signifying (or pointing at) state institutions that reinforce patriarchal violence or referencing specific practices of the state institutions that violate the female body. Its first iteration in Plaza Sotomayor in Valparaíso on 20 November 2019 was part of an artistic event titled *Fuego: acciones en cemento* (*Fire: actions in cement*). As actor Katty Lopez – one of *Fuego*’s instigators – proposes,

(t)he idea was for the performing arts to go out from the theatres to the street, in the context of social protest (...): to cut, to stop, to shake, to illuminate, seeking to make things that are also more joyful as if to say that we are not afraid. (Pinzauti, 2023, p. 153)

Considering that this movement of art toward public spaces was occurring in the midst of a protest movement that became known as “estallido social” (social awakening) (Pinzauti, 2023, p. 148), one can understand this performance’s deep roots in the ongoing social unrest around injustice and inequality.

After its second iteration in front of the court of justice in Plaza des Armas in Santiago on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (November 25, 2019), a video recording of the performance went viral and many feminist collectivities around the globe re-staged it. *Un Violador en tu Camino* has, thus, acquired a life of its own and, as Pinzauti asserts, LASTESIS “think about [the performance] as a porous tool that lives on thanks to other women, queer people, and in general transfeminist collectives all over the world who readapt it to their local situation, speaking about their specific problems and struggles” (2023, p. 161). The global reach of *Un Violador en tu Camino* seems to mirror the movement of globalisation’s cultural products. In this case, however, not only the performance protested systemic injustices on a global scale but also its proliferation occurred outside globalisation’s institutional structures – or, as Liinason proposes, it created a “broad cartography of multiple violences with overlaps or connections as nodes across contexts emerged, and narratives linked violence against women and feminized bodies with police and state violence, dispossession, and extraction of value” (Liinason, 2024, p. 432).

Not only did it map, in other words, multiple instances of gendered violence across the globe illustrating differences and overlaps, it also articulated the connections between this kind of violence to other instances of globalised capitalism's systemic violence.

Finally, considering the settings where the various iterations of *Un Violador en tu Camino* were staged is equally important in further emphasising the connections that this performance articulated: the courthouse in Santiago, but also in New York while Weinstein's trial was happening inside; the Estadio Nacional in Santiago, which was used during Pinochet's dictatorship as a place of incarceration and torture; the Zocalo in Mexico City; the Eiffel Tower in Paris; and the parliament in Athens. These are a few of the places where it was performed – all symbolically significant in their respective contexts. Apart from the fact that such (monumental) sites offer greater visibility, I would like to propose that the re-enactment of *Un Violador en tu Camino* in sites deeply invested with institutional value and meaning, and more specifically invested with monumentality, lay claims on the meaning of monumentality – or even the very essence of capitalist urbanism as it is manifested in monumentality. If the monument, as per Lefebvre's analysis, "is the seat of an institution and colonises the space around it" (2003, p. 21), this performance claims the site as way of decolonising it. If, as Lefebvre continues, the monument controls and brings people together (2003), this performance sought to bring people together differently – beyond or against the institutional structures (of patriarchy) that create space as monumental. If, to put it differently, "monumental space makes power felt," as Nield suggests (2012, p. 225), this performance rehearses defiance to such affects of patriarchal power by willfully performing Other, repressed memories.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Ahmed writes that "[W]illfulness can be (...) a gift relayed between parts, a gift that allows noncompliant or resistant action to be carried out without intent" (2014, p. 175-6). The performing subjects in *Un Violador en tu Camino* assemble a global archive of willfulness in public: they are subjects who refuse to remain quiet or to stay out of sight and in so doing reverse the affects of power. Yet, there is little indication that LASTESIS had any intention of creating an archive of patriarchal violence or a performance of dissent on a global scale. They relayed a gift in which one can begin to recognise a wilful ecology, whose parts decolonise, even if temporarily, the global urban fabric from the logic of (patriarchal, colonial, industrial) monumentality and the kinds of violence it imposes: an ecology inhabited by willful subjects that perform renewed claims to urban life in the streets of globalization.

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