theories and methodologies

Public Domain

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VIOLENCE AS A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PRACTICE IS A CONSTANT. FURTHERMORE, IT BELONGS IN THE POLITICAL AXIS SINCE POLITICAL INstitutions measure, plan, and distribute it, inscribing and administering it according to their productive and programmatic interests.

Violence is adaptable and acquires different forms and formats, which range from the most concrete corporeal reality to the infliction of punishment on the symbolic and emotional registers of the subject. It is mobile but enduring, adjusting to the emergence of new social subjects. The enduring struggle against violence resituates and changes it, bringing about the penalization of practices considered abusive, such as long workdays, certain school regulations, or the beating of women.

The endless humanitarian initiatives that attempt to combat violence are both a symptom and a register of the degree of violence present at the time. Although societies have validated the condemnation of the more archaic abuses, a new form emerges every day, or unjust and inequitable regulations appear. For example, while societies gradually make the child a full subject of rights, the laws tend to reduce the age of penal responsibility to as low as twelve. Thus, the social child is also the penal child and oscillates ambiguously between protection and prison.

Recurrent violence is inscribed in the history of humanity, thanks to a succession of wars that reorganized maps and territories and that mark the course of those who see war as the human condition. War waits around the corner in the expectation of being analyzed and memorialized by future generations. In the era of mass communication and technological expansion, war fulfills the public and enriches the thriving and sophisticated industry of war materials. But one also has to take into consideration the violence that occurs when a society suspends its norms and the state becomes a threat to a portion of its citizens.

Living under the Chilean dictatorship for seventeen years, I, along with millions of Chileans, had to exist under different forms

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and stages of the state of exception—which included curfew, suppression of the right to hold meetings, a state of siege, raids on homes, war tribunals and executions, torture, clandestine detention centers, and disappearances. These extreme circumstances formed the context that was the limit between life and the many deaths inflicted by military, paramilitary, and civilian functionaries of the state.

Argentina coined the term *dirty war* to refer to the depredation by state functionaries of its citizens during the military dictatorship. War has rules (which are not respected), whereas the state's dirty war is rhizomatic, as Gilles Deleuze would say, because it reproduces itself without beginning or end, protected by its clandestine condition. In Chile, the military dictatorship left a trail of destruction: more than thirty thousand were tortured, according to the so-called Valech Report,[1] and about a thousand were detained and disappeared, a terrible category that places the subject between life and death—neither alive nor dead.

Chilean organizations resist accepting the term *war* because the Chilean military junta and the then dictator, Augusto Pinochet, resorted to this term to validate the human and social damage they had caused. What the organizations argue is that there was no armed resistance and that the actions of the dictatorship were implemented in cold blood against political, trade union, and social leaders who were completely unarmed.

Attempting to account for those years is a complex task because the total or partial suspension of the rule of law penetrated, circulated, and lodged in the body of the subject, interrupting thought and altering the energy and direction of everyday life. I want to demonstrate that the dictatorship was everywhere, in both macro and micro spaces, and that for this reason it is impossible to establish a linear narrative, much less a total narrative, because the situation was persistently porous and multiform.

From my experience, I can affirm that the intense originary moment involved understanding that the unacceptable circumstances of life were immutable and that putting up with and inhabiting the new reality required a recodification of signs.

In this sense, self-censorship, which in another situation might be problematic, becomes in a dictatorship a political weapon of resistance. I refer to a rigorous form of self-censorship exercised toward the outside, that radically unknown space in which, because of the fall of democracy, the other becomes an enigma and even a latent danger.

During its first five years, the Chilean dictatorship sought to impose an intimidating totalitarianism through absolute control of an array of institutions and the exercise of systematic violence against its citizens. This citizenry had lost its rights as citizens. The label *communist* or *extremist* was attached to anybody who dissented from the regime, which sought to exterminate what it called the cancer of Marxism.

Some may view this summation of the dictatorship as parodic and perhaps too simple. I agree. But behind this political parody is a repression whose extent is impossible to calculate. Thus, what I term self-censorship can also be undersood as silence, not in an ominous or conspiratorial sense but in the sense of an absence or emptiness that suggests a politics of survival and even resistance. For how can one speak when the forums for speech have been taken over or threatened? Silence as a resource can become a sign. To read and understand silence during the dictatorship allowed one to understand and be understood by others. To maintain one's silence implied an attitude and a form of negation.

It was precisely in silence and from silence that the reorganization of the social text could come about. In November 1978, with the discovery of fifteen human skeletons belonging to detained and disappeared citizens in the blast furnaces of an abandoned mine

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in the small settlement of Lonquén, the political crime and the enforced disappearance of people were publicly voiced. For the first time, the tragic category of detained and disappeared people became a fact, and the paradox was that their existence was proved by a group of political prisoners who were assassinated by state forces.

Thus, in 1978 it became possible to articulate an alternative to the dictatorship. Slowly there began a renewal of discourses. From the world of work to the world of art, simultaneously though not in concert, a process was initiated that would show its complete effectiveness ten years later, in the 1988 plebiscite that said no to Pinochet. Whereas before 11 September 1973 (the day of Pinochet's coup) huge meetings and mass citizen marches demonstrated the rallying power of organizations, after 1978 many specialized, volatile groups were formed, maintaining low-intensity spotlights on all spheres of life, from the communal cooking pots of the shantytowns to centers of learning, from Christian communities to artistic communities. Thus began a rejection of the dictatorship that year after year managed to broaden the reduced spaces.

Political parties operated clandestinely (they were outlawed by the regime), appealing to their traditions, though party tradition did not exactly belong in the dictatorial city, where only the fragmentary, the interrupted, the microscopic movement were possible. Rumors from below and underground meetings characterized a new form of organization that had to negotiate the limits imposed by the dictatorship.

From 1978 on, a gradual decentering took place; the dictatorship no longer maintained an unruffled facade but began to be disturbed by an imperceptible but sustained social movement that from its corners and hiding places rebelled in the face of anomalies that military violence and patriotic speeches no longer could control. The new technology of photocopying provided a metaphor for the social movement's stratagem: to photocopy the present, transmit the photocopy, and gamble on its circulation. A precarious creativity upheld by precarious threads was disseminated.

The Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (Collective for Art Actions, or CADA), in which I participated along with Lotty Rosenfeld, Juan Castillo, Fernando Balcells, and Raúl Zurita, was formed in 1979, among other developments in the art world. This interdisciplinary artistic collective (focusing on visual arts, literature, and sociology) proposed tackling the connection between art and politics by means of what we called art actions. Art actions structured around symbolic fields of meaning focused on the aesthetic and its potential for making social surfaces more complex and dense. The condition of art under the dictatorship demanded a renewal of its project and active intervention in public space. CADA attempted to intervene with a form of public art that was meant to be inclusive, to interpellate not only the passersby who occasionally came across the art actions but also the reading public, through texts and journals, as well as the artistic community that collaborated with the group.

Although I particularly wish to refer to CADA in the political context of the Chilean dictatorship, I must also say that, during those years, the group theorized that the gallery, the museum, works of art and their techniques were not sufficient to create social change and, worse, that they allowed art to be objectified, and this effect established and perpetuated hegemonic cultural domination. CADA put forward a critique of transcendence founded on value, price, and the adornment of historical moments. The art actions took place in real time, and the video record of them was both their archive and a work in itself.

The formation of CADA answered to the need for restitution, corresponded to Santiago's desire for speech, and wished to make of the fragment a strategic material, to convert the unfinished into a performative and vocal element. To speak of fragments in fragments, by means of fragments—in the fragments of

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the city—was not only a methodology but also a recognition that reality was already fragmented. It was fragmented because public life had collapsed and was hemmed in by severe inhibitions that hindered the heterogeneous formation of a citizenship. The actions of CADA formed part of the gradual and costly recuperation of open speech following the five years of general silence, and from that difficult place CADA moved on from coded discourse to a progressively more open project.

In 1979 we used milk as a metaphor and symbol of lack. One of the aims of the Allende government had been to have every Chilean child drink half a liter of milk a day. This initiative was utopian, since the state did not have the economic resources needed to accomplish it, but the gesture marked the social dimension of the Allende project. CADA took up the slogan of milk again, using it to register a political position defined by the well-being of the popular classes and by a government for which the people were central. However, the category of the people had already disappeared following the military government's attack on the workers. CADA's art action was a citation of the past, a past that looked toward a democratic future. But the white of milk also referred to the amnesia that the dictatorship sought to impose in order to legitimate everyday violence. CADA's first art action, *So As Not to Die of Hunger*, demonstrated both its political position and its aesthetic intentions. It sought to advance the relation between art and politics and among art, politics, and poetics. The work with milk operated from the sphere of art and was protected by the opacity of the signs. Its public policy was to constitute an act of social memory by citing the utopian government of Allende in contrast to the extreme depredation of the military government.

But already in 1979 a subtle reorganization was happening, and CADA was part of this process. Art actions like *So As Not to Die of Hunger* were intelligible only in art spaces, but at that time they seemed the most that could be said in public. We managed to spread the meaning of whiteness and of milk in a series of actions performed in various parts of the city, thus ignoring the regulations that had converted the city into a captive of the armed forces as well as of the prolonged effects of the state of exception.

Each of those actions was documented in videos, which received a restricted circulation. The action *¡Ay South America!*, in 1981, involved scattering 400,000 pamphlets over Santiago from six civilian aircraft. The major task was getting permission from air traffic control to perform the work. Through this action, we sought to appeal to citizens' creativity, since a change in political life depended on that capacity. The word *politics* was thus omitted from the pamphlets—self-censored.

In 1982 the neoliberal economic model implemented by the Chicago Boys, who ran the Chilean economy following Milton Friedman's free-market policy, according to which the market regulated itself through the movements of supply and demand, experienced a major financial crisis. The state had to intervene to save the banks, the press, and private companies, but as always those with the lowest income felt the severest effects. Unemployment reached thirty percent, although unofficial estimates were higher. In the midst of one of the worst economic catastrophes, as poverty deepened to unheard-of levels, signs of discontent multiplied.

The first nationwide popular protest against the dictatorship broke out on 11 May 1983. The call for a peaceful protest circulated by word of mouth from one alternative space to another by means of leaflets or phone calls. Thus, marked by bonfires, barricades, the beating of pots, and candles lit in the streets, the protest was massive. The inhabitants of shantytowns confronted the powerful military forces, which ferociously put down their expressions of discontent. When there was a call for a second national protest, the regime

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responded by expanding the state of exception throughout the country and even declaring the fearsome state of siege.

The military repression left an alarming number of dead and wounded, but the protests went on. They occurred exactly ten years after the military coup. These ten years saw the reorganization of civic forces, a reorganization that included new social subjects, such as women, who experienced the rise of what was called the second feminism. The relation of women to politics began to be analyzed in the framework of unemployment; women now had to work and support their families, thus changing cultural habits. "Democracy in the country and the home" was one of the slogans behind which the feminist movement of the 1980s was aligned. Yet just when the dismantling of industry reached its height, the worker was replaced by the shantytown inhabitant as the leader of the popular sphere. The shantytown dwellers and women and young people in general presided over society. The political parties appeared incapable of mobilizing those new forces. In this sense, the shantytowns of the periphery became the models of resistence and the preferred sites for the military to test its strength.

The shantytowns were organized from within; their organizers occupied key roles in both the construction of civil society and the communitarian efforts to get through the economic crisis. In this way, solidarity became statutory and was transformed into a horizon of struggle. One cannot ignore the contribution of the churches, particularly the Catholic Church, which defended human rights through the celebrated Vicariate of Solidarity. Catholics in base organizations also assisted in the work of the shantytowns.

After years of the most eloquent silence, a new discourse asserted itself. That new way of speaking, from many positions and without visible articulations, began to constitute a common subjectivity, leaving behind the many differences between the groups. Christians, Marxists, feminists, shantytown activists, ecologists, graffiti artists, students, human rights victims, returned exiles all appeared together in a common space to unite in the same cause: the return of democracy.

In September 1983, CADA called on artists to mark the surfaces and walls of the city with the slogan "NO+" to activate an open rejection of the dictatorship that was to be taken up by the citizenry. "NO+" enabled the possibility of an insurgent narrative of demands and complaints but also restored the street speech suspended for years through the dictatorship's vigilance and terror.

To establish itself, "NO+" needed the city; to be read, it needed walls. It also needed the writing of others in order to be legitimated. "NO+" proliferated throughout the city in different slogans because of CADA and its proposal to reunite art and politics or, rather, art, politics, and poetics.

"NO+" achieved a dimension unforeseen by CADA; the citizenry adopted it and wrote it plurally on the body politic. "NO+" belonged as much to the city as to its citizens and became a social mechanism of such exactitude that it both condensed and displayed its eloquence. In this sense, "NO+" became an artifact and a grammar in the public domain.

For CADA "NO+" presented an amazing cultural opportunity to conceptualize an impossible relation because political passion devoured the original source of the work—namely, art. From another angle, "NO+," along with the murals of the Ramona Parra brigade, was one of the most mobile, successful, and effective ventures projected by the art world in Chile. But beyond the concrete results, what appears most radical is the way the integration of the other—the citizen—into public art initiated a movement that could not be calculated or controlled and that disrupted the genealogy of art because it unleashed an irrevocable crisis of authorship.

Like an anonymous popular song, "NO+" goes on modulating its demands after twenty-

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six years in marches, strikes, protests, and other symbols of discontent.

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Note

1. The Valech Report, published in two parts in 2004 and 2005, details the abuses committed in Chile during the Pinochet regime, but the testimony from which the findings are drawn is to be kept secret for fifty years (Comisión National sobre Prisión Política y Tortura).

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