

A Woman Artist in the Neoliberal Chilean Jungle

María José Contreras Lorenzini

It's 13 December 2013, 40 years after the state coup in Chile, 500 days after my father's death. I'm performing *Habeas Corpus* in the Palacio de Tribunales de Santiago.¹ I'm standing in the hall where hundreds of relatives of the illegally detained paced repeatedly without any success in claiming justice. I'm standing in the corridors that still hold the echo of all the times that these majestic doors were battered and refused to open.

It's 13 December 2013, 40 years after the state coup in Chile, 500 days after my father's death. I'm performing *Habeas Corpus* in the Palacio de Tribunales de Santiago. It's the first time an artist has criticized the farce of Chilean justice during the dictatorship in the court's building itself. I'm eight months pregnant and my belly is exposed in contrast to—and in protest against—the monumentality of this building, which represents the indifference of the Chilean courts during the dictatorship. *Habeas Corpus* is about the more than 10,000 writs of protection presented to the Chilean courts from 1973 to 1989 on behalf of illegally detained indi-

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viduals. During the dictatorship, the courts decided that all *habeas corpus* petitions had to be processed by the Ministerio del Interior, yet the victims (*los desaparecidos*, the disappeared) were imprisoned by the action of the Central Nacional de Inteligencia, which depended on the same ministry. During the years of the dictatorship, almost all *habeas corpus* petitions were rejected. The few writs of protection that the Chilean courts finally accepted were useless, since most of the time they were accepted after the person had already disappeared or was dead.

It's 13 December 2013, 40 years after the state coup in Chile, 500 days after my father's death. I'm performing *Habeas Corpus*. Outside crowds buy precious gifts for Christmas. Their shoe soles melt as they make contact with the burning pavement—29 degrees Celsius that day. People struggle through the city centre with shopping bags, jostling and pushing to claim the most appealing sale items. The only possible temporality in Santiago's streets is the present moment of consumption.

The contrast between a silent, intimate performance of memory carried out in the old court's edifice and the madness to consume that unfolds in the streets is not accidental. It reflects the process by which Chilean society transitioned to democracy. As Tomás Moulián points out in his classic book *Chile: Anatomía de un Mito*, the official discourses of consensus and reconciliation, which governed the transition in Chile, promoted amnesia regarding the violation of human rights. The official story of silence and forgetfulness resulted in a depoliticization of the population and a surrender of collective agency: 'In the matrix of the terrorist dictatorship that became a constitutional dictatorship the actual Chile was formed, obsessed by the oblivion of those origins' (2002: 18, my translation).

The institutionalized amnesia served one clear objective: to perpetuate the neoliberal system installed during the dictatorship. One cannot speak of neoliberalism in Chile without referring to the dictatorship, and one cannot refer to the dictatorship without acknowledging the whitewashing process accomplished during the period called 'the transition to democracy'. The charge to establish and maintain the neoliberal model was the denial of all the atrocities committed by the regime that now sustains the market policies that govern us.

Unlike other countries that slowly transitioned towards a neoliberal economy, Chile's implementation of brutal free-market policies was a direct consequence of the strategic action of the dictatorship's ideologists. A group of young economists, known as the 'Chicago Boys' because of their training at the University of Chicago, designed and instituted preda-

tory capitalist policies in Chile. The dictatorship's government, hand in hand with the Chicago Boys, masterfully orchestrated a series of measurements, laws, and policies that resulted in what has been called the first neoliberal laboratory in Latin America: the Chilean economy was radically restructured to conform to Milton Friedman's ideas about anti-statism, privatization, and market deregulation. It seems paradoxical that neoliberalism not only survived the transition to democracy, but has actually grown fiercer in the last twenty years.

In the context of this wild neoliberalism, I understand my artistic work as a micro-resistance practice that opposes one of the most radical effects of the free-market economy in Chile: oblivion. My artwork, both as theatre director and performer, challenges the patriarchal authority that determines the rhetoric of reconciliation and the consequent amnesia about our past. I apply feminist modes of questioning the hegemonic system by exposing the stories that have been excluded from the historical record: testimonies, autobiographical stories, and familial archives. I work with memories, and the memories in which I am interested are not properties of an individual; they cannot be privatized or put on sale. They are affects that begin and end in circulation, that acquire life when mobilized. From this point of view, the politics of my artwork radically oppose neoliberal ideology.

The political and aesthetic strategies I use to resist the neoliberal project of oblivion are characterized by two features. On the one hand, they respond to a politics of solidarity that constructs a community in which the spectator, as a co-witness, is compelled to exit the depoliticized position to engage with the re-envisioning of our past. On the other hand, my work highlights the ways of reconstructing our past as articulated by the presence of the body. My performances work with the dimension of culture that cannot be grasped through semiotic analysis, preferring to activate affective dispositions in the spectators. More than putting in circulation a discourse, my work seeks to appeal to bodily experiences, dealing in memories that reside in our bodies and that are mobilized only in co-presence.

THE BLOODY WAY TO NEOLIBERALISM IN CHILE

Only some days after the state coup, Augusto Pinochet had in his hands the document named *El Ladrillo* ('the brick') that indicated how to transform Chile into a neoliberal laboratory. As Naomi Klein claims, Chile

became the first neoliberal laboratory thanks to the implementation of a postcoup economic shock doctrine that left the population too traumatized to react and too repressed to resist (2007). With such an obviously violent origin, the full opening of the Chilean economy to global markets and a sustained policy of privatization sealed the establishment of a neoliberal economy and culture in Chile. The policies and laws imposed during the dictatorship had the supposed aim of increasing efficiency, while they actually served to install an economic system that protected the interests of the business class. In 1975, the privatization policy was applied indiscriminately to almost every single social service: health, education, public transport, food industries. Everything was deregulated and the demonization of any remnant of regulatory governance masked the effects of the transformation—the handing over of every single social right to private corporations.

Surprisingly, since the transition to democracy in 1990, the neoliberal model has been radicalized. During the postdictatorship period, the discourse of the free market has been patched onto the idea of democratic freedom, confusing individual liberty (to consume) with civil rights. Chileans have regained some rights (the right to vote, to gather freely in the streets, and to express themselves more or less freely) while irreversibly being transformed from repressed citizens to precarious subjects whose only agency is to consume. The narrative of transition exalted the neoliberal fantasy of choosing one's own life. This narrative sustained a system that increased the vulnerability of the population in contradistinction to the empowerment and enrichment of the economic and political elites. Astonishingly, even some of the victims of state violence, instead of fighting the system produced by state terrorism, sustained and promoted the liberalization of the market during the postdictatorship:

The transition to democracy in Chile took place in the palace. From it, a public policy model was designed that was dissociated from the democratic spirit, but associated with the search for the notions of efficacy and efficiency inherent to the dominant economic vision. Hence, public policies went through a transformation process but not through a process of democratic transition, as was made explicit in [the development of] the Transantiago [transport system]. The people in the polis did not live any democratic transition. No power was distributed to the citizenry and objectively it has lost power since the dictatorship; there is more anomie in general; inequality indicators (that is, power differentials) have increased; the social fabric has

been supplanted by its false prophet: inclusion in the market. (Mayol 2011: 53–4, my translation)

As Foucault explains, neoliberalism marks the birth of a new governmental rationality that consistently expands the economic form into the social sphere (2008). According to Foucault, the key element of the Chicago school of thought is the transposition of cost–benefit calculations to decision-making processes within the family, married life, professional life, and so on. This strategy results in the expansion of economic criteria to every sphere of life. The role of the state is also reduced and fenced in. The state no longer regulates the market but rather is regulated by it; neoliberalism elevates the market to the organizational principle for the state and society (2008).

As a result, Chile's society suffered a profound cultural neoliberalization. The narrative of success was adopted gradually in the social sphere, where happiness appeared to depend on the increased consumption of goods. The new value system was supported by the disarticulation of social networks and reinforcement of individualistic goals. As Silva argues:

The market has undoubtedly become a very important actor in Chile's reality and its impact on society has by far transcended the strict economic domain. Individual competition and personal strategies have finally triumphed over collective actions. In addition, Chilean citizens have increasingly learned not to expect anything from the state but only from their own personal efforts and achievements. Furthermore, the relative successful performance of the Chilean economy over the last twenty years and the real improvement of the living standards of the population obtained during the same period have reinforced the conviction of many Chileans that political deactivation does finally pay. (2004: 65)

Individualism and the depoliticization of society have pushed Chile to what Gutiérrez (2003) characterizes as a process of 'psychopathization', meaning an increasing lack of empathy and identification with the collective and a consequent anomie (the idea that social norms restrict one's own objectives).

The deactivation of political engagement in the country produced a passive conformism that submitted to the economic model. A timely repoliticization of society occurred in 2006 when opposition to the neoliberal model emerged, particularly from the student movements. It is interest-

ing to note that these were the first massive manifestations in which civil society protested against one of the most emblematic policies of the dictatorship: the conception of education as something foreign to the public and embedded in the private sphere. As Rifo argues, these mobilizations asserted new horizons of collectivity (2013). Student activism drew attention to possible alternative ways of relating to others, and demanded the right to live beyond the bounds of economic rationality and the regulatory power of the market. Unfortunately, it is too early to say if these protests fundamentally altered the free-market system of education. The parliament currently is discussing how to transition towards a more public educational system.

HABEAS CORPUS

Habeas Corpus was performed in the Palacio de Tribunales of Santiago de Chile on 13 December 2013, when I was eight months pregnant. In the performance, I enter the monumental building of Tribunales, which for the first time after the return to democracy was hosting a political performance. I am dressed as the iconic figure of justice, but instead of being blindfolded I keep one eye uncovered. I carry two plastic dishes in parody of the balance of the iconic image. On one of the dishes there is a letter. I slowly walk down the hall while I receive three pails of water as an allusion to the Chilean slang *mojar* (to wet) a judge, meaning to give him a bribe. With my pregnant body, walking on the slippery tiles becomes difficult.

The letter I carry is a real letter that my father, just before he died, 500 days before the performance, asked me to destroy. At the time he asked me to do this, I didn't know the content of the letter; I just knew it had been dictated to my father by a relative, a high-ranking military officer charged with violations of human rights. When my father asked me to get rid of the letter, I immediately thought it could contain something dangerous, a secret, perhaps a confession. The letter was revealed to be an excuse: a statement denying responsibility in a confusing episode in which four Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez militants were kidnapped and murdered. My father's relative explained in impeccable military language that he had nothing to do with the episode. When I read the letter I thought of exculpation, of how Chilean justice did not protect the victims and instead accepted (and still accepts) these false statements that do nothing but perpetuate the pact of silence and block the truth, and thus the possibility of reparative justice.



Fig. 19.1 María José Contreras Lorenzini performing *Habeas Corpus* at the Palacio de Tribunales de Justicia Santiago, 13 December 2013 (Courtesy of the photographer Pablo Macaya)

In the performance, I read the letter, skipping data, names, and words as a gesture that mirrors the avoiding, fading, and hiding of the truth that the declaration itself accomplishes. I then proceed to fulfil my father's desire: I destroy the letter. But as I destroy the letter, I am actually disobeying my father's mandate. He asked me to get rid of it, and instead, I took it to the courts, one of the most emblematic public sites of the polis, and read it out loud. My father was a lawyer, so I'm also taking it back to his place, the corridors and offices where he invested so many years of his life.

After tearing apart the letter and dropping it in a pail of water, while the ink is fading, thousands of ping-pong balls start falling from the second floor and bounce on the tiles of the main hall—just like the more than 10,000 *habeas corpus* petitions that the Chilean justice system decided not to consider remain to haunt the space of our national memory. As seen in Fig. 19.1 I remain squatting, in a position that recalls a typical giving birth posture, while the thousands of balls fall from above.

The performance contests the neoliberal culture in three ways. First, *Habeas Corpus* stresses the private–public binary: by exposing personal stories in an emblematic public space, it problematizes the distinction between the

personal and the public, and, furthermore, it opposes the logic of property. Second, it addresses the amnesia that, as I said before, is the cultural humus of the establishment of a neoliberal system in Chile. Third, the performance offers an intersubjective and intercorporeal space where what seems unspeakable becomes susceptible to transmission by affect circulation; spectators submit to the experience of being affected as they regain their political awareness and agency. I will now review each of these aspects in detail.

NO PROPERTY

The feminist claim that the personal is political has inspired many artworks of the last decades. *Habeas Corpus* performs an action that radicalizes this idea, since it not only uses the personal as political, but also tries to collapse the distinction upon itself. The letter I read may be considered a familial, intimate document, but when it is read out loud in a public space such as the courts, it immediately falls into the space and time of shared belonging. At the same time, the court building as the most emblematic public edifice of the city is redefined and becomes the home of an intimate practice. The performance shows how memories are not ontologically ‘intimate’ or ‘public’, but rather their characterization depends on each particular situated practice that configures them. The subtle and family-scale gesture of reading the letter and rebelling against the desire of my father (instead of destroying the letter, I read it in the courts) acquires the projection of a political action that exceeds the competence of my family. My performance creates a liminal space in the juncture of the private and the public, and it is in this space that a challenge to the official history occurs.

The challenging of private and public distinctions may be a feature of every performance that works with intimate memories and archives: each performance remixes and reloads memories in an idiosyncratic way, relocating memories as private or public each time. One of the most remarkable possibilities of performances working with the intimate dimension is that embracing complexity allows the destabilization of binaries, such as the one distinguishing private and public. Performances of memory such as *Habeas Corpus* apply feminist modes of questioning and raise alternative ways of understanding who we are and how we relate to each other.

From this point of view, the performance is not only an act of transfer but also, more radically, a device that struggles against the notion of property. Neoliberalism plays upon the idea of property—what one can earn, gain, or buy. By publicly exposing the letter and challenging my father’s mandate, I perform a deterritorialization of memory and dispossession of

the self. The heritage of memories of the dictatorship that my father transmitted to me, and that work as postmemories (Hirsch 2012), are shared in an intersubjective space; they no longer belong to me but, thanks to the performance, become part of the collective heritage for a group of people. The performance does not ‘transmit’ memory as if it were something fixed and crystallized, it mobilizes memories, allowing a multidirectional exchange of versions and voices of the past. In a neoliberal culture where property rules the way people relate to each other, the performance produces a trade of affects that constitutes another kind of community.

AGAINST AMNESIA

Besides sharing personal and familial memories, *Habeas Corpus* allows the sharing of gaps in memory. I’m not telling a coherent story about the past; I don’t even know why my father asked me to destroy the letter. For me, the letter condensed all the secrets and blanks of my family’s stories. As a daughter of the dictatorship, I grew up with the arbitrariness of secrets and fragmented stories that couldn’t be reproduced, that remained untold and hidden in a dusty drawer (just like the letter I chose to destroy in the courts). The letter also appeals to the secrets and gaps of our collective memory. Since the author is a military member facing the juridical process for violations of human rights, the letter is also a concrete example of the pact of silence; that is, the implicit compromise among the military and civilians to hide information about the *detenidos desaparecidos*. After forty years, this pact of silence is still strong and has prevented thousands of families from knowing what happened to their relatives. My act of reading the letter and then tearing it apart directly addresses the pact of silence: it puts into circulation what has been scratched and faded out of the official history.

Habeas Corpus tries to subvert, from the trench of performance, the official story of silence and forgetfulness, exposing new alternatives for reconstructing our past. The performance not only disputes memory, but also more radically disputes amnesia. Silences and gaps of memory are not handicaps but resources that may activate affective dispositions. The sharing of memory gaps restricts the transmission of the verbal while it privileges the sharing of intensities. This can only work in the commonality of shared space and time that the performance constructs. The participants of the performance are not requested to understand, but they are invited to be involved from an embodied position in an affective dynamic dimension. What is put into circulation appears in non-narrative forms and man-

ifests as affective intensities. The pact of silence that denies memory is used in a creative work to reassert another way to communicate that cannot be grasped through semiotic analysis and that depends on the construction of an on-site community.

In the last moments of the performance, hundreds of ping-pong balls fall from the second floor and produce an intense sonorous effect. In that moment, there are no words, no message, just the experience of being there, hearing all those balls smashing onto the colonial tiles of the courts, feeling the reverberation in our bodies that vibrate together every time a ball touches the ground. The sound is provocative and evokes the thousands of *habeas corpus* petitions that were not heard during the dictatorship and that continue to haunt that space and the Chilean collective memory.

What the performance does is activate a sensorial path where we can share an experience. Everything that is enacted during the performance rejects verbal language: the words I say while reading the letter are far from coherent, and the moment of the falling balls is non-narrative and explicitly appeals to the sensorial. This is not only an aesthetic choice but also responds to my political position as a woman artist in Chile. By appropriating the mechanism of silencing and erasure, I offer myself as an agent of amnesia. I embody a critique of how Chilean society has chosen to construct our past. In this way, the performative strategies of the piece contest the origin and result of the first neoliberal laboratory in Latin America: oblivion.

POLITICAL AWARENESS

As I have affirmed (2008), performance creates an intercorporeal system that allows a situated and local transmission of affects. As an artist, I am sure that the mobilization of affects produces a political engagement in the spectator. As Irene Wirshing states, ‘with an audience to witness, the untranslatable and non representational is transformed into communication, respect and understanding’ (2009: 67). The political efficacy of *Habeas Corpus* exceeds the gesture of denunciation, obliging an ethical commitment to what is affecting the spectator in the here and now of the convivial encounter. The role of the body here is crucial; solidarity and co-responsibility are constructed on the foundations of the dynamic (and fragile) intercorporeal system that allows the interweaving of different incommensurable dimensions.

What this performance did was invite the audience to collaborate in the finding, recalling, and constructing of our past. As bystanders, spectators are required to engage in the ongoing and dynamic construction of the past. Felman describes the spectators of memory art manifestations as ‘second-degree witnesses’ (1992). The performance puts the spectators in the position of a second-degree witness who gains the responsibility to respond politically in the co-construction of a meaningful conception of the past. What do we do with what we just saw, experienced, and heard? These interrogations followed the performance, and the audience somehow felt the need to do something—to react, to resist. In the postperformance conversation, a woman in the audience recounted her experience as a political activist and shared that this performance made her think about how her political action was mainly focused on the public arena, while there was much else to do in the private and familial dimensions. A young woman said she was moved by the echoes of the ping-pong balls and that she was asking herself how to find the *habeas corpus* documents so as to contribute to their publication. From my point of view, this is one of the most outstanding consequences of performance: you cannot be there without co-participating and co-constructing the memory of the performer and, at the same time, participating in the reconstruction of your own memory.

The performance creates a community, an ‘us’ that amplifies and empowers the potentiality of an ‘I’, a community made up of multiple voices and bodies that dance together. The creation of this ‘us’ combats the atomization and individualization that neoliberal culture has so strongly rooted in Chilean society. *Habeas Corpus* provides a space and time to share the experience of witnessing, thereby providing the possibility of dealing with difficult memories/amnesia collaboratively. What happens in these face-to-face encounters is what Haraway calls a material collaborative thinking practice involving bodies that exceed rationality (1992). The performance inscribes a politics of solidarity based radically on the co-presence of bodies that affect and are affected in a continuous and dynamic way. The circulation of affect implies, in this case, an ethical and political engagement that the spectator, the second-degree witness, cannot avoid.

CONCLUSION

Why did my father ask me to destroy the letter? I still don't have an answer. Was it a way to destroy some evidence that could perform a disservice to the juridical process through which his relative was passing? Or was it a way to cancel that cowardly exculpation? And maybe, because I couldn't think of an explanation, I felt the need to perform in a manner that could open up the possibility of subverting the puzzling mandate.

The challenge to my father's mandate is also a confrontation with the neoliberal way of relating to our past, a way that aims to disappear, destroy, and dismember the collective by imposing fear. I'm a witness to the fears of my parents' generation; I've inherited the silence, the trepidation, the apprehension. Performance allows me to defy this heritage in order to resist. As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith describe, 'the sons and daughters in the chain of familial and thus also of cultural memory attempt to bear witness to the fragmented, interrupted, and mostly traumatic stories they have inherited through verbal, visual and bodily acts of postmemory' (2002: 10). And as Milena Grass noted, the call to action felt even more urgent due to my pregnant body (2015). Before giving birth to my child I had to settle symbolically my family's debt. Far from occupying the position of a soothing and appeasing mother to be—which, as Nelly Richard establishes, was the role that the dictatorship promoted for women (2004: 16)—I was trying to politically empower my motherhood, as a generative position not only of life but also of justice.

The power of *Habeas Corpus* was that it allowed me to perform inquiries into the way we (I, my family, and my country) reconstruct our difficult past. The gesture cannot be executed alone; it needs another who is not just a spectator but instead a subject available to be affected, moved, and transformed. *Habeas Corpus*, in the end, inquires into the ethical and political subjective positions that our neoliberal jungle has imposed on us.

NOTES

1. This performance was part of the workshop Women Mobilizing Memory held in Chile in December 2013, organized by the Columbia Global Center Santiago and led by Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, and Diana Taylor.

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