

Happiness and Post-Conflict

Edited by Constance Goh and Bernard McGuirk



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edited by Constance Goh and Bernard McGuiirk

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Bombs and Poems

The Representation of Conflict through Performance Art

María José Contreras

The aim of this discussion is to situate and analyse the construction and communication of a representation of cultural trauma by means of the performance *Poem Bombing* carried out by a group of Chilean artists called *Casagrande*.¹

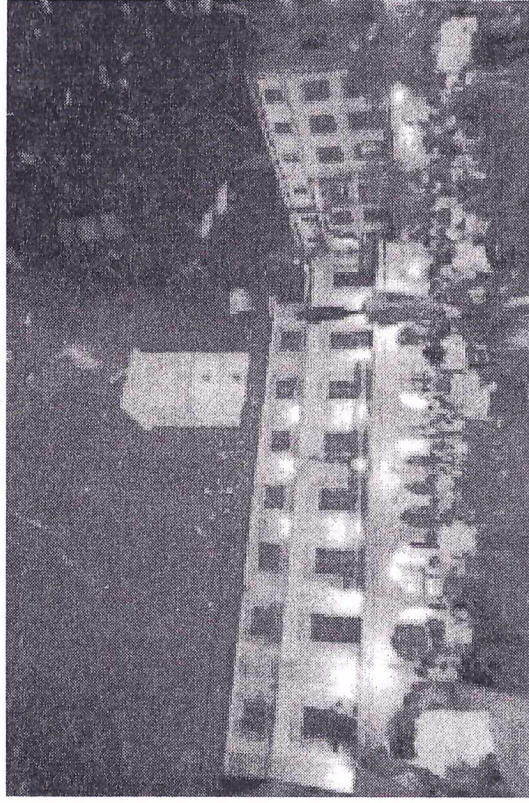
Santiago, Dubrovnik, Guernika, Dresden and Nagasaki: five cities that have been bombed during the twentieth century without being military objectives. In Santiago, on 11 September 1973, the military forces of Chile under the command of Augusto Pinochet bombed the government palace, in what was the starting point of a long-lasting dictatorship. On 6 December 1991 Dubrovnik was bombed by the Serbian military forces, with a tragic outcome for civil victims. Guernika in Spain, on 26 April 1937, became the first city that suffered an air-bombardment in history; this bombardment was cruelly planned by the Nazi military, suffered one of the most barbaric military actions during the Second World War. Last but not least, the atomic bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 5 August 1945, where, apart from the hundreds of thousands of direct victims, many people from the following generations have suffered the costs of the attack.

The *Poem Bombing* project's aim is to bomb again these five cities, replacing bombs with poems.² The first time the performance was presented was in 2001, when a helicopter dropped more than one hundred thousand poems written in bookmarks over the Chilean government building *La Moneda* in Santiago. The project continued in 2002 with the release of more than three thousand kilos of poems over the city of Dubrovnik and in 2004 with a poem rainfall in Guernika. Next, *Casagrande* was preparing poem bombings in Dresden and Nagasaki. I shall analyse the *Poem Bombing* as a cultural embodied practice that renegotiates the representations of conflict, recomposes cultural memory and collaborates in the construction of an alternative

¹ *Casagrande* was founded in 1996, by a group of Chilean visual artists and writers (Cristóbal Bianchi, José Joaquín Prieto and Julio Carrasco). The group has three main projects: 1. Publication of a journal that changes its format in every number (for example: *Transitable* edition (2002), giant posters attached to the walls of some metro stations in Santiago, *Space* edition (2006) a DVD sent to the International Space Library). 2. Cinematographic projects. 3. Public performances such as *Poem Bombing*. www.revistacasagrande.cl

² The idea of releasing pamphlets from the sky has been used both with artistic and propaganda aims. One of the most remarkable launches of political literature from the sky was that of the founder of the Futurism movement Filippo Marinetti (1910) with the launch of the *Contro Venezia Passantista* manifesto from the San Marco Campanile in Venice, and Lauro de Bosis (1931) with the dropping of anti-Mussolini fliers over Rome. The dropping of massive quantities of leaflets is a propaganda practice that has been used in war since World War II.

cultural identity. I shall show how the *Poem Bombing* catalyses new discursive configurations that transform and organise cultural values in innovative narrative and emotional articulations. It will become clear that the *Poem Bombing* performance, as a representation of a past traumatic event, allows the effective elaboration of painful memory.



Poem Bombing in Guernika (photo by Casagrande), 2004.

Conflict as an essential characteristic of culture

The relationship between culture and conflict may be described from different points of view. I shall use as a theoretical frame the model of the cultural semiotician Jurji Lotman who establishes, in *Culture and Explosion* (1992), that culture is a semiotic dynamic device that changes by means of a constant transformation of meaning. Lotman considers culture as the sum result of the individual texts that relate to each other constructing the *semiosphere*, a metaphor he uses in order to illustrate, by a spatial model, the complex relations between different kinds of texts.

Lotman claims that culture changes in two different but complementary ways: by continual development and by explosion. They are interdependent aspects of the same process, continually replacing each other in the unity of dynamic development. Lotman imagines a *semiosphere* built as a whole containing layers at different stages of development. In fact, any synchronic cut of a given culture could reveal such stages. From this point of view, culture works as a tri-dimensional multilayered organism where explosion at a certain layer may coexist with continual development in another. Continuity is a type of predictability whilst explosion brings sudden and unpredictable changes. A balanced condition of culture is characterised by a predominance of continual development, the movements of which are relatively

unsurprising. On the contrary, at the moment of explosion, or we could say of crisis, the outcome is unpredictable, and the system loses definition.

Lotman's semiotic model of culture is of interest primarily because it emphasises that culture is a dynamic system that will never be absolutely stable, and that conflict is an essential characteristic in the definition of culture. From this point of view, culture is in everlasting metamorphosis: change occurs at the same time in multiple ways from subtle mutations to drastic transformations, from agreed modulation to breaking conflict, but in any case, conflict is inscribed in culture as culture in conflict. In this particular context, the notion of "post-conflict culture" is problematic, because culture may not be considered "pre-" or "post-" conflict, but rather essentially "in conflict". The notion of "post-conflict cultures" may be applied to cases where there is a specific type of conflict, a "delimited conflict" that takes place within a definite space and time. In these cases, it should be possible to distinguish clearly a starting and a final event, and the territory where the conflict takes place. The paradigmatic example (but not the only one) of this kind of conflict is war. Only in this definite panorama is it possible to employ the term "post-conflict" in a specific and useful way.

Trauma as a conflict marker

As mentioned, conflict in culture may assume different characteristics, for instance long perpetual wars that continue to exist in different shapes and forms throughout history, "interventions" where a country or organisation attacks a territory in the name of democracy or freedom, sudden terrorist actions, etc. Here, I wish to concentrate on one specific kind of conflict, the cultural trauma. Many authors have used the concept of trauma when referring to a specific sort of cultural conflict (among which *cf.* Caruth (ed.) 1995, 1996; Alexander, 2004; Smelser, 2004; Sztompka, 2004). Here, I shall draw mainly on Jeffrey Alexander's model of cultural trauma:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subject to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander, 2004, p. 1)

A traumatised culture is then a culture the articulation of which has been destroyed, where the basic tissues of social life are damaged, threatening the collective identity. In these cases, communities are no longer able to think together as a "we" about what happened, but each individual or reduced group is isolated trying, probably without success, to interpret the traumatic event. If we think of culture as a system where values, norms, ideologies, beliefs, knowledge and practices bond together in a meaning system (Lotman, 1992), then a cultural trauma may be considered a specific kind of conflict where chaos erupts into organisation, breaking through the textual articulation of culture and thus affecting the meaning system.

The relation of trauma to conflict is that trauma installs itself as a "marker of conflict", occupying a particularly significant place in its representation. For example, in the case of Chile's dictatorship, political and social conflict lasted for many years, but the representations of the conflict usually recall the bombing of *La Moneda*, of course, because it was the beginning of the totalitarian regime, but also because it was experienced as traumatic and, as a result, this particular moment strongly determines historical memory and identity.

Trauma summarises in a particular concrete experience the broader conflict, becoming a paradigmatic example of the whole. Collective traumatic experiences take a specific position in the construction of cultural memory because of their particular quality in terms of an intense emotional arousal of which is difficult to think. After a bombing, the collective subject of culture remains perplexed, paralysed, incapable of any understanding. Cathy Caruth (1995) describes these "limit" circumstances as characterised by collective silence and by the impossibility of talking about what happened, of telling of the traumatic event.

As in psychological trauma, trauma marks conflict by narcotising the past and constantly returning as the most prominent remembrance, defining the diachronic perspective of the system. From an individual psychoanalytical point of view, Freud (1899, 1920, 1929) gave reasons for this ever-returning behaviour through the fact that in a traumatic experience there is neither a motor reaction nor a thought-association able to represent the experience. So the unelaborated memory is always ready to re-emerge as the most important and immediate aspect, haunting persistently conscious life. According to Freud, in order to position the traumatic experience as a past event, it is necessary for the remembrance to be associated to thinking. In a parallel way, we may think that the cultural trauma comes back to cultural memory because it lacks a collective representation, shared by the whole community and stable in time. Until a cultural representation of the traumatic experience is constructed, the major reaction to cultural trauma will continue to be shock that, instead of provoking representations, usually blocks them.

In semiotic terms, we may say that one consequence of cultural trauma is the loss of competence with regard to providing a stable meaning to the experience. In the face of a high intensity stimulus, culture remains in a state of perplexity, of diffuse emotional arousal, that is not attached to any narrative meaning. In this status, culture is not able to situate the traumatic experience within a cognitive frame that could in the first instance represent the violent event and could then endow it with a cognitive description and explanation. So, from a semiotic point of view, the consequence of trauma is the impossibility of giving a narrative closure to the event that remains in the meaning system as an ever-circulating experience disjointed from a stable meaning.

Bombardment as cultural trauma

The bombardments of the cities listed before may be considered

cultural traumas, in the sense that the bombs not only destroy human lives and infrastructure but also the meaning system of the community. In the case of bombing, the community itself is threatened, the survival of its people is at risk, and the circle of the "we" is reduced to the minimum members. The abruptness of war bombardments facilitates the experience of trauma: in a short period of time, radical unexpected changes at various levels take place, people die, institutions are not able to function anymore, the urban landscape changes radically, the whole daily routine is broken, and intersubjective bonds are broken.

A bombardment is a catastrophe that irrupts into the city's territoriality, breaking the key distinction between city and sky as non-city and, in doing so, somehow destroys the nature of the city itself. As Juan Pastro Mellado (2005) claims, the bombardment breaks down with violence the territory of the city and, in doing so, injures its symbolic composition. War bombardment perverts the symbolic boundary of the city, in the sense that it distorts articulation in a freakish way. The sky, which usually belongs to the ambit of nature, becomes a space used by the enemy. Aggression comes from a non-anthropoid space, but nonetheless is a cultural aggression. The enemy is not nature any more (as it usually is when the destructiveness comes "from the sky", as in the case of natural catastrophes), but it clearly comes from a "cultural other". The consequence of this perversion is confusion and the inability to trust the most fundamental distinctions such as: nature-culture, city-sky, safety-danger, etc. A semiotic result of this symbolic perversion is that sense loses its definition so that the socially agreed conventions are debilitated. After a bombardment, culture is damaged in an analogous way as human bodies are injured: sense is mutilated, lacerated, becomes anaemic, a fragile sense that is not efficient in provoking a stable interpretation of what happened.

Poem Bombing as isotopy

One of the strategies to deal with trauma is the artistic manifestation that may produce and communicate alternative representations of the catastrophic event. In this context, the performance *Poem Bombing* is an attempt to cope with trauma, by offering a way to represent it.

The *Poem Bombing* recalls the traumatic event not as a perfect double of it, but by selecting and emphasising certain elements that are similar to the original bombing and narcotising other aspects. This performance may be interpreted as an *isotopy* of the original bombing because it possesses elements common to that of the original traumatic bombing. In Umberto Eco's words an *isotopy* is a "constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence" (1984, p. 201).

In the case of the *Poem Bombing* the interpretation of the *isotopy* is possible because some similarities recall the past bombardments in a direct way. The *isotopy* of bombing functions on several levels, in the first place, both events (the traumatic event and the performance) are cases of "bombing", that is of "massive dropping of objects from the sky". Independently from the type of objects that are dropped in each case (bombs and poems), there is a semantic constancy that allows the

interpretative linking of both events. But the *isotopy* is sustained as well by other kinds of constancies, for instance from the common gesture of throwing things from the sky. Other than the semantic constancy, at the level of gesture, the performance repeats the gesture of the bombing. As in the case of war bombardments, the artists of *Casagrande* did not alert the population about the performance in order to recapture the original surprise effect. So both events were unexpected even if the emotional quality of the surprise is radically different and this similarity supports and strengthens the construction of the *Poem Bombing* as an *isotopy*.

Furthermore, from the point of view of the corporeal experience of the participants, at one level the body relates to both bombings in a similar way. It is not usual to observe objects falling down from the sky into the city, so this rare perception constructs a constancy at the level of perception and of body related to space. At least at one moment, the perception of things falling down from the sky implies a certain physical action in order to perceive what is happening. This initial constancy runs parallel to a significant difference in the behaviour of the body, that in the case of the war attack closes and folds into itself looking for protection, but in the case of the performance opens in a receptive gesture.

Another constancy that contributes to the generation of the *isotopy* is the coincidence of the geographical area where the *Poem Bombing* occurs with the area that suffered the war bombing. If the performance could have been presented in a city where no original bombing has occurred, then of course it could have been difficult for participants to associate, from a narrative point of view, both events. But the performance actually occurs *in situ*, becoming then a comparable event that commemorates the exact space of the original bombing. In the case of Santiago the space is quite reduced, it is the square and surroundings of the government palace of *La Moneda* bombed during the *coup d'état* in 1973. In Dubrovnik the *Poem Bombing* takes place over the centre of the city, where the attack was strongest during the bombardment in December 1991. Also in Guernika the *Poem Bombing* occurs in exactly the same place as the original bombing in 1937. The fact that the performance happens in the same city, or in the case of Santiago, in the same single spot of the city, facilitates the construction of a link with the original bombing.

The construction of a ritual space: a scenario to render visible the traumatic event

The unexpected bombardments, both with bombs and poems, allowed the conversion of the daily space in a particular special place. As a result of the war bombardment, an unsafe, dangerous, unknown, unpredictable space is generated. Instead, in the case of the poem bombing, the space became the place of ritual, where reflection about the past and the present identity is authorised and animated.

According to Richard Schechner, ordinary spaces can be transformed temporarily especially by means of ritual action (2002). The *Poem Bombing* may not be considered a proper rite, but a sort of ritual action

or, in the words of Schechner, "memory in action" (*ibid.*, p. 214), in fact it presents at least five of the ten characteristics that Schechner (*ibid.*) describes as essential characteristics of ritual. In the first place, the performance is inscribed in a symbolic time of repetition, of the timeless eternal present, where tenses are not linearly ordered. On the other hand, participants actively take part in what is going on (even if they do not really know what is going on), they are not mere spectators but they participate in the event. People collect the bookmarks while they are floating in the air, or they pick them up from the ground, they exchange the bookmarks with one another, and they talk about what is going on. In this sense, creativity is in the hands of the collectivity, all the participants in the performance, without distinction between artists and spectators, take part in the carnivalesque event that is happening at that particular moment, they all participate and believe. And, as we shall see, the performance, as a true rite, has its efficacy in provoking results and transformations.

The surprise effect of the *Poem Bombing* performance inaugurates a new quality of space, transforming it into something different from the everyday space: streets, squares, the historical centre, suddenly become spaces where something unusual takes place. The ritualisation of the space is possible where a public space shared by all participants is yet to be constructed. In fact, on the three occasions when the performance was presented, the public space had been constructed previously by other kinds of events: in Santiago, the poem bombing occurred during the *Festival Internacional Chile Poesía*, and thus people were gathered in the square before the performance started, in Dubrovnik the performance took place in the context of a Dubrovnik Festival and in Guernika during a popular feast. So even before the performance takes place, the space is already a public space.

What the *Poem Bombing* adds is the fact that the public space becomes a place of and for ritual: it transforms into a new cultural environment signed by symbolic value capable of hosting a self-reflexive event. The constitution of a ritual place allows the individual trauma to be staged in public and by doing so to become an experience to share, to talk of, to tell, in few words, a representable experience.

The construction of a representation of trauma in a public ritualistic place helps the elaboration of trauma, for the reason that it then becomes a collective task that must be assumed by the whole community. The *Poem Bombing* performance, allows the creation of a spontaneous *communitas* that in Victor Turner's (1982) description corresponds to the experience of camaraderie, the sense that "we are altogether in this", that emerges spontaneously thanks to certain procedures of ritualisation of space and time. When the experience of *communitas* happens, then the communal sense is reinforced and empowered and people may feel that their problems can be resolved with the help of the group which is felt (in the first person) as "essentially us" (Turner, 1983, p. 48). In this ephemeral but powerful state the elaboration of trauma is the responsibility of a communal effort, and is thus more affordable for individuals who are no longer alone.

Novelty of repetition: a healing temporality

In order better to comprehend the temporality that cultural trauma inaugurates, I shall take inspiration from the vast psychoanalytic literature on individual trauma and then discuss in what measure it generates insights about the cultural trauma. In this context the exemplary point of view is that of Freud's theories of psychic trauma. From the beginning of his theory Freud studies trauma and its relevance in psychic life. Even though he develops and changes his understanding about trauma throughout the theory, some theses however remain constant. In particular, I am interested in his description of traumatic experience as an indelible imprint producing permanent effects in the conscious life. To Freud, the psyche remains fixed on trauma, and the memories of the traumatic event, as Charcot describes it, become "parasites of mind" that come back persistently as nightmares or re-enactments. In this sense, the traumatic experience turns into a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work (Freud and Breuer, 1893-95). Even when repressed, trauma somehow manages to remain vital, coming over and over again to conscious life, insisting on presenting itself as an enigma (Freud, 1905). In Freud's successive conceptions of trauma (1926), he reiterated the fact that trauma constantly re-emerges, intruding into the mind of the patient as repetitive nightmares, unexpected thoughts related to trauma, and compulsive preoccupation with the event.

It is not until "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), that Freud offers a metapsychological explanation about this drive to repeat the traumatic experience that cannot be stopped. According to Freud, the repetition of traumatic experiences in nightmares and re-enactments responds to the *thanatos* principle, that is a natural tendency to death and *status quo*, an instinct "*inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*" (*ibid.*, p. 36).

Freud's theories of trauma change their etiological explanations throughout time but, nevertheless, particularly interesting is the persistence of noting a paradoxical movement between the unconscious resurfacing of the memory of trauma and the psychic effort to forget it. He notes that people that have a traumatic neurosis are not necessarily completely engaged with thinking about their own trauma but, on the contrary, spend a lot of psychic effort in order to forget and repress the memory of trauma. This particular relation between memory and forgetfulness relates to a rather steady conception of trauma's temporality. To my mind, this precise postulation may be very useful to the comprehension of cultural trauma where one can also observe this ever-returning of traumatic experiences that culture cannot simply leave behind.

Cathy Caruth (1995), from a psychoanalytic point of view that also wants to explain social processes, states that trauma is actually not about the "objective" event itself, nor about the instant reaction to it, but rather what becomes pathological is the remembering of trauma. As a pathology of memory, trauma is not healable at all, it remains between memory and amnesia, it will never be completely remembered

or completely forgotten. Trauma is condemned to remain in a transitional dimension as an unassimilable memory and at the same time as a memory that is impossible to forget.

To my mind, rather than the complex relation between trauma and memory that Caruth explains, what is more crucial is the *impossibility of positioning trauma as a past experience*, the ever-coming-back of a plain rustic repetition of the original experience. After a traumatic experience, the system (whether it is the psychic apparatus or the meaning system of culture) is unable to elaborate the experience, the busyness of the event prevents the functioning of a cognising strategy and as a result it remains as an outright experience that is not connected to a specific meaning and thus does not have a narrative closure. The experience comes back in a never-ending re-presentation but without achieving the status of a stable representation. In this sense, trauma would be described as a hole in meaning (Caruth, 1995), an inability to associate the plain experience with a representation or meaning.

The inability to give a representation and thus a meaning to the traumatic experience relates to the fact that the traumatic event does not belong to the quotidian parameters of reality. In Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's words:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of 'otherness', a salience, a timelessness and ubiquity outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 69)

The difficulty in giving a stable cognitive meaning can be explained by the temporality that trauma inaugurates, a temporality that is not linear but is similar to the temporality of unconsciousness where no before or after is possible. This particular type of temporality is what I call the *trauma's temporality*, signed by the double effort of *ever-returning* and at the same time *never becoming* a memory.

Performance art may also fit into the same genre of temporality, a conception of time as *repetition and eternal present*. I have shown before how trauma is characterised by the ever coming back of the traumatic experience, in the same way one of the crucial characteristics of performance is that it is inscribed by the total lack of spontaneity, in Shechner's words, performance is "never for the first time, always for the second to the nth time; twice-behaved behaviour" (2002, p. 29). As Taylor (2006) asserts, both trauma and performance are characterised by their "repeats": the ever-coming back of something that cannot be left in the past, that cannot acquire the status of a memory.

The equivalence of trauma and performance exceeds the nature of its "repeats". Both cases are not only simple "repeats" but also "unique repeats". Traumatic cultural symptoms like, for example, the constant

recalling of the horrors of the wars and ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia in theatre that Munk (2001) remembers are a repetition from two points of view: in the first place because they repeat the traumatic experience, for instance, in a performance that directly reproduces a war situation; but these performances are also a repetition of other performances: the last recall to war in theatre is a repetition of the preceding performance and of all the others that came before. So every event is not just a repetition, it is also a unique event that has its own singularity. On the other hand, the status of performance may not only be described by repetition. Performance and all kinds of living arts (theatre, dance, etc) are marked by the ephemeral nature of each presentation. Even if a theatre company repeats the same performance for twenty years, each time it performs the spectacle is different.

Jaime Coloma (1999) claims that there is always a novelty in repetition that makes the quality of each repeat unique. So repetition is never a simple double of the preceding event, but it defines itself in the dialectic dynamic between repetition and uniqueness. The fact that trauma and performance are both constituted by this paradoxical status of being both a repetition and at the same time a unique event allow them to match in a structural way, and thus empowers performance to cope efficiently with trauma. The performance, more than any other artistic manifestation, as a live event is able to weave multiple temporalities: through the alive present happening (here and now) past can be represented and thus appraised, and simultaneously future can be imagined in novel ways and somehow rehearsed.

The ambiguous way in which performance and trauma relate to reality may turn out to be therapeutic in the sense that even if it cannot "solve" the traumatic experience (what may?) it does produce important effects and transformations in the view of the past traumatic event and also in the perception of time and of how history is constructed. The *Poem Bombing* produces emotional, somatic, cognitive and narrative effects that transform the way culture produces meaning and understands the world. The novelty in repetition implies a whole new manner of interpreting history and time, instead of promoting an ideology of the ever-returning it animates an ideology of time as a spiral where transit on the same point is never equivalent to preceding transits, where what happened before may never be repeated in the same way, and it implies that a new passage implies a growth in knowledge; for instance, to represent representing of history not as an eternal repetition of painful events but as a fluid collective marching through time, where healing is achievable, where an optimistic elaboration of the traumatic past is possible. The performance as an embodied practice engages different temporalities advancing a conception of time and history as more manageable cultural devices.

The embodied experience and transmission of traumatic memory – the interactions among people in the here and now – make a difference in the way that knowledge is transmitted and incorporated. (Taylor, 2006, p. 155)

So the effect of performances such as the *Poem Bombing* is not exclusive to the theme it broaches, it also influences the way culture understands and signifies the past in general. This broader effect has to do with accepting other kinds of history management that go beyond the official archive. As Taylor (2003) suggests, history is constructed both by the archive and the repertoire where the embodied memories rest as live knowledge. And live performances, even in their ephemeral status, may construct the ruins of what may become in the future part of the collective memory.

Multiplication of enunciation: the transmission of trauma

The live performance implies the co-presence of artists and spectators in the same space and time, and this produces an important semiotic effect: enunciation takes place at multiple complex levels. The fact that the *Poem Bombing* is a live performance creates the multiplication of the enunciators and also the enunciatories. Whenever a live event takes place, one can distinguish two simultaneous levels of enunciation: the first level that we could call *presentation* and that is of the material co-presence of the performer and the participant. At this level, the performer is not representing anything different from its own psychophysical presence, the operation is mainly that of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. Another successive level is the *representational* where the representation of something other than the mere presence of the performer prevails, as in the case of traditional theatre where the actor represents a character. As Marco de Marinis (1982) notes, the live performative event is always in between these two dimensions of *presentation* and *representation*, as if these were two poles of a continuum between which it is possible to position any kind of performative event. The double dimension of performative events results in a sort of multiplication of the enunciators and enunciatories, constructing a kaleidoscopic dynamic of enunciation.

When artists from *Casagrande* drop from a helicopter or a plane hundreds of thousands of bookmarks with poems they are performing a concrete action from the site of their individual subjectivity, in the role of artists, and in the case of Chile in the role of young people who were born during the dictatorship. The effect is even more complicated when *Casagrande* performs the artistic gesture of bombing with poems the cities of Guernika and Dubrovnik. This gesture is enunciated from their individual position, but also from their national identity. What does it mean that a group of Chilean young men are releasing poems over Guernika to commemorate a bombing that occurred more than 60 years ago? Who is performing the action: the single artist, the group of artists, the person, a young man who, as many other young men, rejects war and violence?

A multiplication also takes place on the side of those that participate in the performance, when people attending the social events in each of the three cities discover themselves being bombed by poems. At one level, those who are actually present when the performance takes place are there physically but, at the same time, they are somehow "acting" several roles, for instance, the role of those who years ago were in the

same place during the original bombardments or the role of the sons and daughters of the traumatised generation who have been vicariously traumatised by the telling, or the silence, of the older generation.

According to the time that has passed since the original bombing, we may distinguish important differences in the enunciative strategies and in the pragmatic relation that is established each time the performance is presented. In Santiago, some of the population who were present when the performance took place lived the original traumatic event, except for those who were under twenty-eight years old who could probably interpret the performance in a different way. In Dubrovnik, the situation was radically different because we may assume that almost everybody who participated in the performance (except for children under eleven years) had a personal memory related to the bombardment of 1991. In this case, it may be supposed that the efficacy of the *Poem Bombing*, at least at an emotional level, was stronger. In Guernika, the performance is done after sixty-seven years. At this time, probably few of the people who survived the 1937 bombardment participated in the *Poem Bombing*. The effect of the performance is then less emotive and more symbolic, in the sense of a historical repair or commemoration of the bombardment.

This multiplication of the enunciation characteristic of the live artistic events allows the transmission of the traumatic experience to younger generations and thus the construction of a collective memory. The performance not only works for those who experienced the original trauma, but it also produces effects in the whole community. The *Poem Bombing* allows the elder to remember and evoke the past and, at the same time, to tell and communicate it to the younger generations. The performance distributes the knowing of the traumatic event, permitting all of the community via the witnessing of the re-enactment, symbolically to witness the traumatic event. Something similar to what Felman and Laub (1992) explain about the traumatic experience that, until it is actually told, remains as non-existent:

While historical evidence of the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply the trauma – as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, not taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 57)

In the case of a public performance the co-participation of the hearer in the construction of the representation of the traumatic event is amplified, the hearer becomes a multitude of hearers who are also viewers and participants. The blank screen that Felman and Laub describe becomes then a cultural screen where the inscription of the

event responds to a collective effort. The horrible original experience cannot be told, there is no possible frame that may explain what happened, but the performance at least in some measure distributes the perception of a bombing that isotopically recalls the original bombing and by doing so offers visibility to the past traumatic event. Even if the bombardment is presented in a modified modality, it is still capable of offering visibility to the past, to render somehow perceptible to the community the past traumatic event. In this sense, the performance becomes a vehicle that transmits the memory of the traumatic event from the affected generation to younger generations. Young people in some way witness the traumatic event during the performance and thus become part of the future memory of the community. Elaboration is possible only by sharing the experience with those who were not present in the traumatic event, and these non-present "available" people are the younger generations.

By re-externalising the traumatic event, the performance places it again into the public domain, giving by these means the possibility of cultural and historical repair. Projecting the personal traumatic experience into the public space functions as a metaphor of the restitution of trauma to its source: to the *other*. But what maybe helps healing and elaborating trauma is that at the same time, another *other* emerges that is no longer the enemy, but their own community that is now capable of coping with the memory of the past. As an *isotopy*, the *Poem Bombing* recalls the traumatic event, allowing the association of trauma with an experience where the creativity is in the hands, again, of the collectivity. As a result, there is a restitution or reinforcement of the "we" that the cultural trauma drastically damaged. Even after sixty-seven years, these kinds of actions strengthen the community identity by giving a space and a time to represent the past altogether in a creative way.

History is transmitted to the younger generations not by means of an archive, but by means of a practice that creates an embodied, singular memory. So in the case of traumatic experiences, as Felman and Laub (1992) emphasise, it is not enough to tell and hear the testimony, but to live the experience of *living through* testimony and, I could add in the case of cultural trauma, of *living through testimony altogether in the community and for the community*.

Embodiment of the memory of cultural trauma

The *Poem Bombing* performance provides the community an opportunity to react to the overwhelming past traumatic event. As a delayed re-action, this collective performance helps the coping with the traumatic event in particular ways but mainly it allows the *embodiment* of the memory of the cultural trauma. The re-interpretation of the original traumatic event is an operation that happens in the first place in the body of individuals and the body of the community. Then, from this embodied practice, in a second moment, some verbal narratives may emerge, but these are supported by the physical experience of participating in the performance of *being here and now recalling a here and then*.

From this point of view one cannot agree completely with Juan Pastor Mellado who affirms:

Causing to rain printed words in precarious backups implies, in this framework, the desire for filling a hole. The word appears like a matter that fills the empty one of sense. It is then, that the act of repair is produced. (2005, p. 3)

The *Poem Bombing* actually responds to the desire to fill the hole of meaning, but it does so not by means of the word, but by means of performance, by means of an embodied practice. The *Poem Bombing* inscribes the memory of the past event by means that go far beyond the verbal strategies.

On an individual scale, living through the re-enactment of the past provokes the construction of corporeal isotopies that, rather than semantic links, are associations that work at the level of the memory of each individual. Those who in Santiago, Dubrovnik and Guernika had the experience of the original bombing, from a certain viewpoint, live an analogous, perceptive, stot, and gestural action with different emotional reactions. The original perception of bombs falling from the sky is attached to emotional reactions such as terror and panic. In the case of the performance, the perception is somehow the same (still objects dropped massively from a flying device) and thus, by a corporeal memory, it recalls the original emotions but that are no longer pertinent or coherent to the context. By re-experiencing a gesture that recalls the trauma but that is no longer marked by vital danger (in the performance there is nothing to fear) the effect may be liberated, cancelling the strictly firm fixation that characterises the experience of trauma.

In this way, the *Poem Bombing*, drawn from physical memory, connects to affective, cognitive and collective memory. An embodied practice that thus recalls a physical individual experience is able to link with emotions and then with a narrative memory. We could think of the *Poem Bombing* as an operation that works from the bottom to the top, it constructs sense and memory from the most immediate levels to more rational and sophisticated organisations. The sense-making from an embodied level executes an efficient *re-semanticisation* of the trauma, thanks to the fact that the performance is an embodied practice, the traumatic experience may acquire a more complex meaning that is rooted deeply (as the traumatic event) in the body knowledge of the individuals. Simultaneously, from this individual bodily constructed sense, the community may start attempting a *re-semanticisation* of trauma that may include not only a horrifying view of the past but simultaneously the perception of a community that is capable of constructing a collective meaning of the past.

Laub and Felman (1992), among other authors, insist that trauma is impossible to tell and that only a live performative and participatory process of telling and listening to the traumatic memory may transmit it to others. As said before, the specific feature of a performance art event such as the *Poem Bombing* is that it encourages the re-

elaboration of trauma by means of an *embodied collective practice*, spreading the witnessing process to other generations. Accepting the impossibility of telling, the *Poem Bombing* proceeds from being silence privileged as action. There is no voice, no narrator, no verbal discourse, just a collective *living through* the experience of a delayed re-action to the catastrophe. I do not mean here that this performance may be enough to heal trauma, but rather that it is an efficient attempt to elaborate the lack of meaning that a traumatic experience leaves behind.

The *Poem Bombing*, even as a public event, is focused on the embodied (re)action and thus reaches the collectiveness by soliciting the individual singular experience. The notion of the body as an archive proposed by Nicholson (2003) is useful to understand the effects of performance. Nicholson affirms that by live performance, by participating in the telling of others' stories, the memory becomes part of the participant's own experience. Those who did not suffer the original bombardment, through the performative re-enactment may acquire a bodily knowledge both of the present performance and of the past event. The elaboration of trauma is then anchored in individual body experience and from there projected to the cultural space. Schechner (1985, 2002), in his famous thesis about restored behaviour typical of performance, insists that behaviour is separate from those who are behaving:

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the casual systems (personal, social, political, technological, etc.) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original 'truth' or 'source' of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted - even while that truth or source is being honored [...] Restored behavior is 'out there', separate from 'me'. To put it into personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I were something else', or 'as I am told to do', or 'as I have learned'. (Schechner 2002, p. 28)

By means of performance then, what was individual is no longer property of the individual but is transmitted, and distributed in the community. The strategy of acting through singular bodies to social bodies is efficient as a way of re-externalising the trauma and thus allowing a public elaboration of it, resituating it to a public and political dimension. So what initially came from the external sphere and that tragically interrupted into the individual's system, finally returns to the external social dimension where it may find, in collaboration with a cultural embodied system, a meaning that may come back into the individual to help the elaboration of trauma.

The capacity of these kinds of embodied practices to cope with collective trauma responds to the fact that performance art works on several levels simultaneously: from the individual physical experience to the collective body of culture, from the lack of semantic meaning to a bodily meaning, from the impossibility of remembering and forgetting to

the transmission of memory. As Diana Taylor affirms: "Embodied practices make the 'past' available as political resource in the present by simultaneously enabling several complicated, multilayered processes" (Taylor, 2006, p. 68). The restitution of the traumatic experience to the public space renders available the past experience to the community not only to elaborate the trauma, but also to manage and manipulate the political representation of the past. In the case of the *Poem Bombing*, the political aspect is of course present, but I could say in a more general way, the political message is unspecific, promoting the need to evoke and reconstruct historical memory rather than to propose a particular connotation of the past event.

From fiction to reality and backwards

Is it possible that a fictional event such as the *Poem Bombing* may in any way have real effects and provoke cultural transformations? What I maintain here is that the *Poem Bombing* performance rather than transmitting and representing the cultural trauma, retroactively collaborates in the historical reconstruction of it. In this sense, the efficacy of the performance goes beyond the elaboration of trauma, even sixty years after, as in the case of Guernika, it still affects and transforms the way in which the original event is conceived.

As said before, the performance reproduces some constancies of the original bombing, and by doing so it creates the sense effect of an *iconic* relation to the original traumatic experience, being therefore interpreted as in direct relation to the traumatic experience. This semiotic operation gives reality to both the fictional performance and also to the original traumatic event.

On the one hand, the representation of the conflict by means of performance art produces a truth effect, collaborating and constructing the real of discourse and representation. As Peggy Phelan (1993), from a cultural psychoanalytic perspective, claims:

The visible itself is woven into each of these discourses as an unmarked conspirator in the maintenance of each discursive real. I want to expose the ways in which the visible real is employed as a truth effect for the establishment of these discursive and representational notions of the real. Moreover, I want to suggest that by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real. (Phelan, 1993, p. 3)

From this point of view, the representation of the traumatic experience acquires the status of a real event that somehow leaves the original experience behind an obscure screen that makes the traumatic experience unintelligible. When the representation is established then it is somehow impossible to go back to a clean unpolluted vision of the original historical event. But, in the same way, by rendering visible the past event, the performance allows consideration of the past event itself as a real and undeniable event. In finally giving the traumatic experience some kind of representation it heightens it to the status of a *real* past event. Even if the original event may always remain in the

shadow of the representation, the fact that it really happened remains as an uncontested evidence.

In this dialectic movement, the real and its representation construct each other at the same time. As Judith Butler says, "the real is positioned both before and after its representation, and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real" (1990, p. 106). In this sense, the movement is double and mutual: the real is interpreted through representation and at the same time representation is interpreted through the real. Therefore, the reality effect influences the status of the original event, in this case the war bombing, and it collaborates (together with other representations) in producing the reality effect for the past event.

In this sense, we may think of the *Poem Bombing* as a true *liminoid* manifestation. In the words of Victor Turner, liminal entities "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions and ceremonial" (1969, p. 95). Liminality describes this status of transition, a passageway that is often inaugurated by traditional rites that allow people to play with familiar cultural aspects and render them unfamiliar. According to Turner (1982), in complex societies liminality is presented in the form of the liminoid, mostly signed by play and individual initiative, where an artist or a group of artists plays by recomposing in experimental organisations conventional cultural elements. For Turner, the existence of such entities is fundamental to maintain the elasticity of society, the continued transformations of social life. The consideration of performance art as a *liminoid* phenomenon is relevant to underline the fact that the efficacy of the representation of conflict depends on its ambiguity towards the event that it is representing. I believe that the greater the tolerance to ambiguity of the representation the more the representation embraces with efficacy the complexity of the historical conflict and events.

(In)conclusions: some questions about happiness

In this discussion we have examined the complex relation that in this case emerges between conflict, trauma, and the representation of trauma and memory. Trauma relates to conflict because it "marks" a certain precise space and time, and thus it has much more radical effects on individual and collective memory. Bombings, such as the ones in Santiago, Dubrovnik, Guernika, Dresden and Hiroshima are powerful signals that crystallise memory, that become specific and intense marks that people identify and remember clearly.

Because of this particular characteristic trauma is an excellent core for strategies that have the objective of coping with trauma. In fact it is not accidental that cultural therapeutic strategies of representation of conflict usually concentrate on traumatic events rather than on the general conflict. Trauma, as said before, is easy to recall because it is still present in people's minds, and so also the cultural strategies of representation of conflict take advantage of this quality of trauma. Once the traumatic experience is represented then it may be associated with a more stable meaning, and from there move to the understanding,

reconstructing and meaning making of the broader conflict.

As an embodied practice, the *Poem Bombing* used certain specific strategies in order to cope with the cultural trauma such as the installation of a ritual space that permits a collective witnessing of the re-enactment (and by these means also a symbolic witnessing of the experience of trauma), the weaving of several temporalities that are in-between repetition and uniqueness and the multiplication of enunciation as a way of transmitting the memory of trauma.

The case of the *Poem Bombing* has been useful in discussing the relationship between conflict, trauma and memory, but we have not reflected deeply on its relation to happiness. The first obvious assertion is that we are dealing with a complex, not direct nor unidirectional, relation. In one way, the *Poem Bombing's* purpose is to install the exact opposite values from those of war, if war is about violence and breaking through the social organisation, the performance promotes values such as peace, a creative way of life, and community participation. In this sense, I could say, with polemic intent, the *Poem Bombing* is a "happy representation" of a tragic event. But, then, some important questions emerge: is it possible to represent conflict by a "happy representation"? How much of the original conflict is left out of the "happiness" and "optimism" that the performance encourages?

Performances and artistic events that deal with conflict use two alternative strategies: either they represent the event in a tragic way or, as in the case we are studying, they represent it by a "happy representation". In the first strategy, the representation is loyal to the pain and destruction that the original conflict situation generated, whereas the second obscures the painful aspects of the original event and masks them behind a joyful appearance. I suppose that the happy representation does not mean necessarily that the traumatic event had any positive aspects, but it prefers to recall it from the present time by happy means. In this sense, the happy representation is oriented (optimistically) towards the construction of a happier future and the painful representation is oriented towards the recalling of the tragic past. Whether one strategy is better or more effective than the other does not seem important to me. What is crucial is to maintain the complexity of the original traumatic event in the representation of it. I am not maintaining that the representation should be realistic, but I think it is necessary that it support a degree of indeterminacy, that it allow and contain an open question about the past.

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