

María José Contreras

THE BODY OF MEMORY: MARÍA JOSÉ CONTRERAS' PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN THE CHILEAN TRANSITION

THE MILITARY HOSPITAL OF SANTIAGO was just in front of the building where I lived with my brother and mother. Every time we drove in or out of our parking, my mother's *Citroneta* (Citroën 2CV) had to pass through a checkpoint. I soon learned to be quiet and still and to avoid looking directly to the man pointing a gun to my mother's temple. I still remember the contrast of the noise of the *Citroneta*'s engine with the silence inside our car. I was so little, and yet so disciplined. As a child, I couldn't quite understand this life of precautions, but I could certainly feel the terror of the adults that surrounded me.

I was born in 1977 in Santiago de Chile. Pinochet had been ruling for four years by that time and would rule for 12 more. I am a daughter of the dictatorship. I have been characterised as a woman performance artist of the transition period, a period that was initiated in 1989 with the end of the dictatorship and that, for many reasons, is still an ongoing process in Chile. My performance practice not only is contextualised by the political situation in my country but also radically addresses the post-conflict culture in which I grew up.

One of the key issues that recur over and again in my work is the problematic relation to memory, both from an individual and a collective point of view. The transition to democracy in Chile was marked by the politics of reconciliation that allowed justice only 'as possible'. (The first president of Chile after the dictatorship, Patricio Aylwin, said in a famous discourse that justice would have been made in the measurement



of the possible (*justicia en la medida de lo posible*). This discourse, installed by politicians during the early years of the transition to democracy and somehow negotiated with the still Commander in Chief Pinochet and his followers, promoted the idea that what the country needed in order to achieve reconciliation was to turn the page, 'leaving the past behind' (Hite, 2007). In order to perpetuate the neoliberal economic system imposed during the civil military totalitarian regime, the state imposed a politics of amnesia that hid the violation of human rights (Moulián, 1997). The narrative of reconciliation was sustained by the political and juridical validation of the pact of silence that concealed the responsibility of civilians and military in the crimes committed (Richard, 1998). Stories of the *desaparecidos*, *ejecutados políticos* and tortured, nevertheless, struggle to find a symbolic but concrete place in the collective narratives of the past and still fight to be visible and to restore a juridical, social and ethical justice. My performance practice is effectively linked to the story of these oblivions.

As a performance artist I have been particularly interested in exploring the relation of memory and the body: What is the role of performance engaged with memory work? How can we displace the notion of memory as something 'imprinted' in the body? How may performance promote a particular mode of communication that flows betwixt and between bodies allowing nonsemantised memories to travel among us? What are the scenic strategies and procedures that favour a collective memory work? How may performance display and re-elaborate the postmemory of the dictatorship in Chile? According to Marianne Hirsch

Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the persona, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these memories were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories of their own right.

(2012:5)

In my case, even if I was born during the dictatorship, and thus, I do have some memories about the state violence of my own, what my parents told me about what was going on did constitute a sort of postmemory.

In order to approach these questions, I have been travelling through different formats within the live arts. I am interested in the mutual fecundity of artistic research and artistic practice. My base formation is in theatre, with a strong imprint of Eugenio Barba's methodology and aesthetics, which I learned in Italy at Teatro Ridotto. During the years I lived in Italy, I worked mainly in what Barba called *terzo teatro* (third theatre). Eugenio Barba wrote *The Manifesto of Terzo Teatro* in 1976. In that document, the founder of the Odin Teatret distinguishes *terzo teatro* from the traditional theatre, which counts on institutionalised funding and the avant garde theatre: 'This is the paradox of the Third Theatre: to submerge oneself, as a group, in the universe of fiction in order to find the courage not to pretend' (Odin Teatret webpage).

In parallel with my theatrical practical education, I did doctoral research at Univeristà di Bologna about the role of the body in performance practices. In 2008,

after obtaining my PhD, I returned to Chile, where I continued devising and directing theatre within the aesthetics and politics of the *terzo teatro*. Some years after my return, I preferred to define my work as performative theatre, tending toward a theatre that valorises an aesthetic of presence and that quests for the convivial present event. The year 2011 marked a turning point in my art career since I suddenly discovered the political efficiency of performative practices in nontheatrical spaces. Since then, my art has been navigating the fluid terrain of theatre and performance, always trying to further problematise the limits of representation, searching for new ways of relation with the spectator–participant and new methodologies of creation.

As this brief summary reflects, I've been less interested in working within a specific frame, art form or aesthetic than trying to respond to the questions that obsess me. In the context of twenty-first-century performance arts, the transit among formats seems to me an interesting and fertile way of proceeding. I try to intervene in the limits and boundaries of what usually is defined as theatre, performance art or public intervention, labels against which I still have to fight in a context like Chile.

The performance of memory: from visibilisation to problematisation

In 2008, after a yearlong laboratory, I premiered *Remite Santos Dumont, a mise-en-scène* based on real letters written by patients of the Psychiatric Hospital of Santiago between 1916 and 1931 (Remite Santos Dumont (2008), Teatro de Patio. Directed by María José Contreras. Cast: Carlos Aedo, Macarena Béjares, Carla Casali, Javier Ibarra, Andrea Soto. Scenography: Los Contadores Auditores). The letters had been found recently in a dusty box in the basement of the Hospital and so my first intention was to render visible this historical unknown material.

Remite Santos Dumont was presented as documentary play, that is, a document-based theatre. Spectators knew they were attending to a documentary theatre play, and as Janelle Reinelt claims, they “come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand” (2009:9). This promise of documentary was foundational in the way I envisioned the play. I wanted the spectators to know the letters, to hear what was not yet heard. I conceived the metamorphosis from the documents to the scene as a change of media that could increase the accessibility of these documents. I somehow had the illusion that I was unveiling something, I now understand I treated the past as a thing that could be exhumed in the performance.

Almost all the texts in the play corresponded word by word to the texts in the letters. All except for one scene, one that was written by me and that was based on a game we used to play with my father and grandmother. While having tea, we used to play at changing the end of popular adages. We could continue for hours, imagining improbable endings for proverbs. Without knowing much why, in *Remite Santos Dumont*, I disobeyed my own premise of documentary theatre and included a scene that had nothing to do with the letters, but that represented one of my most

precious infant memories. The insertion of a biographical element in the play was a seminal seed of the course my work took many years later.

Even if the play was a great success, after the experience something made me uneasy. I decided to further explore theatre of the real, this time, approaching testimonial theatre.

Replicating the laboratorial methodology, I started to work on a new piece, *Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva* (2008–2013) (*The Sounds of the Coup*) (Directed by: María José Contreras. Direction Assistance: Ornella de la Vega. Cast: Pablo Dubott, Andrea Soto, Carolina Quito, Vicente Almuna, Andrea Pelegri, Luis Aros). This was a performance based on testimonies of people who were five to ten years old during the 1973 state coup in Chile or during the resistance protests in the 1980s. *Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva* resulted from an interdisciplinary research project at the Theatre School of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. This project was developed in 2008 under the guidance of Milena Grass (theorist), Nancy Nicholls (anthropologist) and María José Contreras (theatre director) and was titled ‘Theatre and Memory: Strategies of (Re)presentation and Scenic Elaboration of Children’s Traumatic Memories’. *Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva* pushed even further the idea of problematising the material of the real and the theatrical device.

After working with the testimonies, I soon understood there was no memory to rescue, but a memory to co-create. Each interview displayed a particular present view about the infant memories. The interviewees were never neutral to tell their past, the past stories were always reconstructed from a particular present moment.

I no longer conceived my work as the expression or communication of an unknown past, but rather as the problematisation of the theatrical work with memory. *Pajarito* became a play about the challenge of artistic mediation in the mobilisation of memory. I asked the spectators to attend the performance with an individual audio device (an mp3, at that time) and earphones so while they watched the actors they could hear a soundtrack that included the original voices of the testimony givers, the actors reading the testimonies and fragments of music. The soundtracks were synched mathematically with the actors’ actions, so if a certain scene performed on stage lasted two minutes and 32 seconds, the audio fragment would coincide precisely with that time lapse. The soundtracks also included silent moments that matched with the moments in which performers spoke on stage. This way, each spectator heard sounds and music both from the stage and from their individual audio devices. I made different versions of the soundtracks. People could choose between one of the versions when entering the venue. It was a blind selection, since they didn’t know what they would find in each of the soundtracks. This device allowed us to produce two effects. The first was to divide the audience into different groups that interpreted and experienced the performance differently according to the soundtrack they chose. This effect homogenised each spectator’s position to those described in the testimonies (that the information they had about the political situation depended entirely on what they heard – or didn’t hear – from others: adults). The second effect was to make evident the double status that the performance of the testimonies has, namely

the original testimonies (the original voices heard through the audio tracks) and the 'mediated' interpretation of testimonies (the actors' voices). In this way, the work self-consciously demonstrated both the raw testimonies and our own mediation of those testimonies, thus making manifest the negotiation between the real and its representation in our own practice.

In this piece, I was not looking to reconstruct others' narrated memories, but rather to work creatively on the complex and paradoxical epistemological status of testimony. Instead of forwarding the 'true' stories of these children, I aimed to expose the complexities involved in the restoration of traumatic memories, especially when these memories were imprinted during childhood.

The other: from spectators to participants

In 2011, the student movement in Chile lasted ten months. Many universities were occupied, and almost every week thousands of students went to the streets to demonstrate and put pressure on the government to push radical reforms in the educational system. The School Theatre of Universidad Católica de Chile, where I teach, was occupied for three weeks and classes were suspended for over a month. When my students deposed the mobilisation, we had only one week to prepare the final exam for the course 'Movement'. In the context of the strong political arousal and debate that surrounded us, it seemed to me so vain to be locked in the classroom preparing for an exam as if nothing was going on. Together with my students, we decided to go back to the streets and perform there.

We decided to do a durational performance in one of the most important squares in Santiago. As the political debate was on access and quality of education, we decided to invite 24 professors to teach a 45 minute class on things that 'really mattered'. The students invited one of their grandmothers to teach them to bake a cake, a salsa dancer to teach them to dance, a young Mapuche professor to teach them Mapudungún (the language spoken by the Mapuche people in Chile), a woman to teach them how to kiss better, among others. Each teacher had to teach their class for 45 minutes, and subsequently, we could in 15 minutes re-elaborate what we had learned with our bodies. The performance lasted 24 hours.

This experience marked my view about the role of the spectator. During our daylong performance, many passers-by joined our classes; some brought us food, and others organised to protect us from some people that, late at night, wanted to disrupt our performance. The proximity with the other was a crucial input for my work. After many years of directing and devising theatre, presenting in important venues in Chile and abroad, I suddenly felt the need to relate in a more direct way with the audience and to explore how to work with my body in nontheatrical spaces.

The year 2013 marked the fortieth anniversary of the state coup. Coherently with the performance works I started doing after 2011, I convoked a massive memory action called *#quererNOver* (*#wantnottosee*). For more details of this action see Taylor (2016), Preda (2013), Contreras (2015). As the title suggests, this performance was

meant as a protest of some people linked to Pinochet's regime who were pleading they didn't know at the time that human rights violations were occurring systematically as part of state politics. As an artist, I felt rage against those people who tried to clean their image and exculpate themselves, so I decided to make a massive performance that would hit them right in front of their eyes and say, 'If you didn't know, it was just because you didn't want to see'.

In 2013 there were still 1920 *detenidos desaparecidos* in Chile, so I convoked 1920 people to lay on the streets for 11 minutes on 10 September 2013 in order to create a sort of scar into the city. *#quererNOver* was an attempt to mirror the paradoxical condition of *detenidos desaparecidos*; the action constructed a presence in the city that immediately disappeared. The bodies lying in the streets were not representing the missing; rather, they exemplified and communicated the nonpresence of the *desaparecidos* and the strategies that supported their oblivion.

Surprisingly, people responded to my call and executed with solemnity the performance. The line was made up of unknown people that united under a political scope; they assembled their bodies to create a fragile and yet powerful 2 km line in the streets. As a visible scar, it reminded us of what has been denied: on the one hand, that there are still so many people missing, but on the other hand, that there are people that still deny the responsibility of their disappearance, that know where to find the missing and still maintain a pact of silence. *#quererNOver* was a direct art action against the hygenisation of our past.

What made this action so powerful to me was that this embodied empowerment was sustained by the collectiveness, the solidarity between bodies of strangers that, without knowing each other, not only came to the streets but also coordinated in time and space to create this visible scar. What made this memorial performance possible was the dependence of bodies with other bodies. *#quererNOver* taught me that performance could provide a collaborative and embodied handling of memories that produced an expansion of the spectator's position. The hundreds of people in the line were neither spectators nor actors; they became participants, co-witnesses and co-authors of the massive action.

This piece had a great national and international impact and sealed my interest in performance, in public action and in the immediacy of the contact with the other.

On processes, methodologies and collaborations

During the months of my pregnancy and lactation I performed the *Trilogy of Baby Specific Performances* (2013–2014). Exploring my motherhood position, I tried to investigate, from a creative–practical point of view, gendered strategies of transmission of memory. Each performance articulated family archives, embodied familial transmission and collective narratives in order to pose the question of how performance entail the intertwining of the intimate and the public and at the same time challenges the capacity to transmit not only what is remembered but also the secrets, amnesias and non-emblematic memories. The “trilogy of baby specific performances”



María José Contreras, *#quererNOver*, 10 September 2013, photo courtesy of the artist.

include: *Habeas Corpus* (Santiago, 2013), *Our Amnesia* (Montreal 2014) and *Protesis* (Istanbul, Paris, Santiago, 2014).

In *Our Amnesia* (Montreal, 2014) (part of the IX Encuentro of the Institute of Performance and Politics) I performed with Franco, my four-month-old son. The questions that inspired the performance were: Since my father had died the year before, how could my son get to know who my father was? What could I transmit about him? Could I choose the contents of my memories that I wished to pass through to my son? By what means could my son get to know all the things that as a child I knew about the dictatorship thanks to my father's stories?

I performed in a large room but decided to use just a corner of the room. I entered the space with a suitcase full of the ping-pong balls (that I had used on the first performance of the trilogy: *Habeas Corpus*), while I sang a song that I used to chant as a girl. That was the beginning of the spectacular event but the performance started many weeks before when I decided to write on every single ping-pong ball a word that could recall an anecdote with my father or a story that he had told me.

The process of preparation of the performance was as crucial as the encounter with the participants. For weeks I lived a long ongoing performance: every time a memory came into my mind I had to write them on the ping-pong balls. The enterprise of externalising my memories (and synthesising them in a word) was very difficult since it forced me to be in a state of mind to accept and retain the flow of memories that came to me as free association. From "pan con palta" (bread with avocado) to "Citroen", "Parque" (park), "74" including also words related to the stories of my father about the dictatorship "MIR", "Venda Sexy" ("sexy band", this was the name of a centre of detention "specialising" in sexual torture and violation) each day I impressed my memories on the ping-pong balls.

In the performance, I took the balls out of the suitcase and put them on the floor while some ventilators made them fly. I tried to grasp them but they were just too light and flew all over the place. Spectators helped me to congregate all the ping-pong balls. Then I took my four-month-old son in my arms and asked the public to choose any ball and read out loud the word. I heard the words the audience called and explained them to my son, one by one. The performance depended on the concrete interaction with the public. While I heard the words said by audience members, other things came into my mind. The audience helped me to reconstruct the bits of memories that inspired the words written on the balls. In *Our Amnesia*, as my four-month-boy heard what I had to say, the audience also got to know many things about my life, my relationship with my father and about Chile.

As I mentioned before, in my view, artistic research and practice are completely linked, if not two aspects of the same process. As the experience of *Our Amnesia* shows, the process that precedes the actual performance is crucial. The attention to the creative process has led me to find, at the university, a place from where I can project my practice. In the academy, I've advocated for artistic research as a valid way of producing knowledge. As Borgdorff (2011) asserts, art practice is able to generate new understandings of complex problems in the context of complex universities.

To me, the academy has been a privileged space to have the time and freedom to experiment and make mistakes, to labour in arts without being submitted to the laws of the art market.

The academy also provides a propitious environment for collaboration. As an artist working in the academy I'm invited to share my work, to discuss it, to put it in dialogue with other artist's visions and perspectives. These conversations often lead to fruitful collaborations that transcend the traditional disciplinary landscapes. In the last few years I'm always more motivated to destabilise the individual authorship to advance towards collaborative practices. Projects such as *Valor!* (2016 in collaboration with the architect Carolina Ihle) and *Domestik* (2016 in collaboration with Trinidad Piriz) have been excellent opportunities to generate knowledge through art and to exceed the disciplinary boundaries that sometimes oppress art disciplines.

Looking backwards to my work as a performance artist, I realise my role as faculty of the School of Theatre clearly corresponds to the ethics and politics of my own performance practice. One of the constant features in my performance work is that, most of the time my desire is invested in the process instead of the final art piece. I love to work through ideas and concepts, to experiment with materials and procedures, and to practise different alternatives in order to discover what I want to do and how to do it. The interest in the creative process is something I have inherited from my initial theatre formation and, in particular, from the tradition of Grotowski and the Odin Teatret. When I met the Odin Teatret more than ten years ago, I was surprised by their rigour and methodologies; the creation process was never a result of inspiration but always the product of months and sometimes years of proving, rehearsing and exploring. My initial formation as an actress responded to this tradition, and this is something I conserve as a treasure and have protected in all the contexts I have been. The attention to the creative process, the protection of the space to explore and do research through the art practice, and the continuous quest for new aesthetics and politics are the core premises that inspire, guide and motivate my performance practice.

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María José Contreras (b. 1977)

María José Contreras is a performance artist and theatre director based in Santiago de Chile. She holds a PhD in Semiotics from the University of Bologna. Contreras studies and creatively explores the relation between the body, memory and performance.

Contreras worked in Italy as an actor with Teatro Ridotto, Bologna, where she encountered and was influenced by the methodology and work ethos of the Odin Teatret. Later she founded Tres Teatro and developed a daily body-based training programme exploring the principles of physical and expressive movement practice

In 2008, after returning to Chile, Contreras founded Teatro de Patio, a theatre company that has since worked with material of the real (testimonies, archives, documents) in order to interrogate the status of memory and history in the context of post-dictatorship Chile. One of the most important works of Contreras is *Pajarito Nuevo la lleva* (2012), a play based on testimonies of children of the Chilean Dictatorship.

Since 2011 her performance work has involved direct engagement with audiences, working specially through body, politics and post-conflict memories. Her performance work has been presented in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, the USA, France, Italy and Turkey. Her work has been profiled in journals and books around the world.

She currently teaches at the School of Theatre and PhD Program in Arts at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

Key works

Aquí (2016)

Suelo (2016)

Trilogy of baby Specific Performances (Habeas Corpus, Our Amnesia, Protesis: 2013–2014)

#*QuererNOver* (2013)

Pajarito Nuevo la Lleva (2012)

Remite Santos Dumont (2008)

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