

Post-conflict Cultures **A Reader**

edited by Cristina Demaria



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For Silvana

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**Claudia Di Girólamo and Rodrigo Pérez's *Aquí están*:
Little Resistances in the Context of the Fortieth Anniversary
Commemoration of the Military Coup in Chile**

María José Contreras Lorenzini

In 2013 Chile commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the military coup that ended Salvador Allende's government and began Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Throughout 2013 we witnessed an explosion of practices and discourses revolving around our recent past: a plethora of seminars, talks and academic classes; an abundance of acts and homages took place, while in the field of the arts, theatre plays, films and documentaries were produced and broadcast. Public and private museums featured exhibitions related to the last 40 years. Even TV channels scheduled fiction series and documentaries that had as their backdrop precisely the dictatorship years. As Isabel Piper (2013, 1018) states, all of a sudden everyone was talking about the dictatorship: "numerous social actors (movements, organizations and institutions) that on this occasion – as if they did not want to be left out of this trend – organized acts, seminars, film series, issues of journals, cultural gatherings, etc., related to the coup and the dictatorship".¹

In the context of the fortieth anniversary commemoration, one of the most active fields in the production and circulation of practices and discourses on memory was the arts. Creative expressions have played a very important role both during the dictatorship and in the post-dictatorship, managing to articulate meanings that were marginalized, erased and written out of political and academic discourses (Richard 1998). In the post-dictatorship context, the arts' main role has been one of resistance to official memory, unveiling what has not been said or proposing idiosyncratic and expressive forms to criticize the modes of articulation of hegemonic memory. This critical trend was consolidated in the context of the fortieth anniversary, where, as Caterina Preda (2013, 51) reveals, a series of works of art dealing with memorialization emerged: "Rooted in the dictatorial past [they] raise topics and subjects associated with that very past, unresolved during democracy".

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.



Fig. 1. José Sosa reading Salvador Allende's last speech.
Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos.

In this effervescent climate, the project *Aquí están* (Here They Are) emerges as an interesting practice for several reasons: first, it is an action that articulates the political by using artistic strategies of intervention. *Aquí están* proposes a complex game between levels of production, reception and circulation of memories that stands out among other works presented in the context of the commemoration. The expressive resources that come together in this intervention are multiple and are mutually nourished: *Aquí están* works with testimonial word, visibility and performativity. This marks a big difference from the great majority of the commemorative artistic pieces that worked within strict disciplinary frameworks, following the modes of expression and canons of each artistic discipline (visual arts, theatre, dance, cinema, documentaries, etc.). On the other hand, the intervention has an intergenerational aspect that proposes an ongoing and necessary discussion on how the memory of the dictatorship is transferred to new generations. All in all, the dialogue (or the dispute) between the stage of the Museo de la Memoria and *Aquí están* presents two modalities of the commemorative work: on the one hand, the “museumification” of memory; on the other, the less ambitious but always effective creation of a contextual and local practice of memory.

***Aquí están*: From Testimonial Word to Visual Representation and Performativity**

On 11 September 2013, the artistic intervention *Aquí están* was carried out in the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago, Chile. The intervention stemmed from the actress and theatre director Claudia Di Girólamo, who, thinking about the emblematic black-and-white photographs of the *detenidos desaparecidos* (missing detainees) as a way of representation, wondered:

what would these people be like if portrayed alive, with hope, with strength, with beliefs. I asked myself what the detained and disappeared would be like if they were to be painted and portrayed by the youngest members of their families, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And who could tell them what these people were like. I obviously thought about the relatives of the detained and disappeared: mothers, fathers. (Di Girólamo in Insunza 2013)



Fig. 2. The paintings by girls and boys displayed in the forecourt of the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos.

Di Girólamo designed a complex device in order to raise and elaborate this “vital” characterization of the detained and disappeared in an artistic way. First, family testimonies were collected; in a second stage, these testimonies were read to the younger members of the families of the detained and disappeared: girls and boys listened to tales about relatives whom they had never met. Then, the kids were asked to paint a portrait based on the stories their elders told them. The pictures turned out to be colourful, vital portraits that included distinctive objects that represented the life experience of the detained and disappeared: “full of colour, sun,

the football team they liked, the places they liked to go to” (Di Girólamo 2013a). The paintings were exhibited in the Museum’s forecourt, from 11 to 16 September 2013.

On the evening of 11 September 2013 the project concluded with a final event named *Aquí están* (Here They Are).² The event was designed and directed by Di Girólamo in collaboration with the theatre director Rodrigo Pérez, who called on thirty actors and actresses to read the testimonial narratives to the public at the fortieth anniversary commemoration of the Chilean state coup. The testimonies were adapted in order to include solid data regarding the circumstances of their forced disappearance (Di Girólamo 2013b). That evening, little by little, the forecourt began to fill with people: families, elderly persons, youngsters and kids. The guests sat on the floor, in the bleachers, waiting to see what was going to happen. Suddenly the performers moved forward to the centre of the forecourt, where several chairs formed a spiral. Each one carried a white handkerchief, a red carnation and a printed sheet of paper. They sat on the chairs and waited. The court was in complete silence. Gradually the people in the audience left their position as spectators and advanced towards the forecourt to sit in front of some of the actors and actresses, who, paper in hand, read the testimonies provided by relatives of the *detenidos desaparecidos*. This intimate reading of the testimonies ran for a couple of hours, after which some of the artists sat in front of the microphone to read the testimonies. The audience listened attentively, silently, emotionally. Towards the end of the afternoon, a renowned national actor, José Sosa, showed up dressed as Salvador Allende, with his distinctive spectacles and a three-coloured sash across his chest. The silence turned sepulchral. Sosa sat in front of the microphone and read the speech which Salvador Allende uttered moments before dying during the bombing of La Moneda Palace. The actors held their white handkerchiefs high. “*¡Viva Chile! ¡Viva el pueblo! ¡Vivan los trabajadores!*” [“Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!”] recited Sosa, while dozens of people in the forecourt answered, yelling with great spirit: “*¡Viva!*”

² *Aquí están*. Original idea: Claudia Di Girólamo. Co-direction and dramaturgy: Claudia Di Girólamo and Rodrigo Pérez. Researcher: Ximena Faúndez. Co-researcher: Bárbara Azcárraga. Research assistants: Esteban Olivares, Ignacio García, Manuela Maturana and Diego Urra. Induction and family communication: Raffaella Di Girólamo. Artistic supervisor: Fernanda Di Girólamo. Artistic assistant: Francisco San Martín. Production: Teresita Di Girólamo.



Fig. 3. First phase of *Aquí están*. Testimonial narratives are read.
Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos

Mediations and Translation Processes

It is well known that every testimony is a construction which, as Giorgio Agamben (2002, 153) states, is played out within the borders of what can be expressed: the testimony is only capable of translating the presence of an absence, the impossibility of speech, there where the impossibility comes to life through the possibility of speaking. The translation of an absence is even more axiomatic in the case of the testimonies of the detained and disappeared. When testimonies are used in artistic practices, their condition of impossibility is reinforced: the artistic work based on testimonies implies a battle in which the experience is subdued to fit the rules both of narrative and of aesthetics, while trying to overcome the situation where the borders between what is real and the textual-artistic simulacrum become blurred.

Generally speaking, artistic manifestations that are based on testimonies work in the awareness of the reality effect they produce, and try to complicate and question notions such as authenticity, rather than establishing truths (Martin 2013; Forsyth and Mergson 2009). What is at stake in such pieces is not what is “real” but the “reality effect” they may produce. *Aquí están*, on the contrary, installs itself, in a rather naïve way, on the level of truthfulness, concealing the enunciation tracks and

presenting the testimonies as if they were the direct recounting of a reality. On the Museum's web page, *Aquí están* is defined as a testimony rescue (Museo de la Memoria 2013), an idea which Di Girólamo reinforces in different instances. The project promotes the idea that the tribute rescues “the” memory, as if there were just one memory, and as if this could be exhumed and shared in the final performative event. Without any problematization of the categories of reality, authenticity or veracity, *Aquí están* achieves the dissimulation of the number of mediations entailed in a collaborative and collective construction of memories which are arranged from the present and, thus, are plagued by mediations and translation processes.

A first level of mediation is the testimony provided by the adult relatives. The act of the relatives of the disappeared giving testimony not only responded to the translation of personal experience into verbal language, but also to the framework imposed by the creative process itself. Unlike other kinds of testimonies, this narrative was raised with a specific methodology that defined its content, tone and type. First, those testifying were instructed to piece together a tale for the children, focusing on the lives of their loved ones, being warned that they would later be read in front of an audience (Insunza 2013). These instructions constitute a framework that significantly shapes the discourse. Then, the research assistants proceeded to cross-examine the relatives of the detained and disappeared, according to particular guidelines: they would begin with physical appearance and then move on to ask what they liked to do, how they behaved, etc. The relatives spoke while the assistants took notes, performing another undeniable selection of the testimonial material. This form of testimonial compilation implies a high level of mediation which results in a narrative which is a co-construction that emerges from the interaction between the one testifying and the examiner. Far from being a “salvaged” truth, this enunciative framework produces a testimony that is strongly marked by the communicational interaction of the present.

The translation of testimonies into portraits is a further level of mediation, a mediation that could be defined as inter-semiotic, as it translates verbal discourse into a visual configuration. In my opinion, this is one of the merits of the project, because it opens up a whole new perspective by admitting that the children's re-elaboration of memory is not restricted to the verbal. The portrait, like the testimony, is not made in a “free way”, but it too responds to a clear framework defined by the

authors' view of the piece. For instance, all children use standard materials, and, as Insunza's (2013) video shows, each boy and girl is given a small mannequin that guides the portrait, imposing a mimetic figurative pattern of the human body. The simple act of providing a scale figure of a human body demonstrates that the directors were looking for a certain degree of figurativeness in the portraits that could clearly connect the narrative to the portrait.

It is interesting to note that, although the majority of the portraits were in fact figurative, some strayed from this framework, proposing more abstract paintings. In a radio interview Di Girólamo assesses the abstract elements as "strange", revealing her expectation of figurativeness. "The portraits are truly beautiful, that is, they are spectacular if they weren't so painful; they are really stunning, full of colours, of sun, with the football team [the detained and disappeared] liked ... the places they liked to visit, so then we have the representation of the countryside, or the city or the house, or nothing; or, suddenly, there are places that are quite abstract or very strange where they locate them" (Di Girólamo 2013a). The preference for the figurative responds ultimately to the prevalence of narrativity over visuality, and may, I think, be on account of the director's theatrical training, which implies in one way or another a strong link with the word.



Fig. 4. Reading of the testimonial tales. *Aquí están*.
Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos

In the encounter with the public a new mediation process occurs, which passes by way of the voices, the corporeality and subjectivities of the actors and actresses. The vast majority of the actors and actresses participating in *Aquí están* worked in television and so were well known to the general public. This generates a game of mediations that entails not only the framework imposed by the artistic practice, but also an interaction with mass media, such as television. The public recognition and the fame of the actors and actresses participating in the event cannot but influence the reception of the event, which ceases to be one characterized by the “greatest possible simplicity” (Di Girólamo 2013b) and acquires the tones of a spectacle.



Fig. 5. Actor Héctor Noguera reads one of the testimonies at the microphone. Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos

But the presence of renowned actors and actresses not only spectacularizes the action, it also facilitates an emotional bond, the affective tuning with the public, as well as the identification processes with the public. Because of the pre-established relationship with the actors and actresses (mediated by television), the narratives resonate with greater familiarity, facilitating the affection of the participant. As affirmed by Fisher-Lichte (2008), mutual interaction in live performances occurs with more promptness and effectiveness when a previous emotional circuit exists. Like an already existent path, this allows the emotional and

corporeal bond to be more seamless. The inclusion of well-known television faces in this event subverts its own limitations: the public comes waiting to meet their favourite artists, who use this very influence as a seductive and affective tool in order to ease the communicability of the testimonies.

Aquí están therefore proposes a device that is full of mediations, which is the reason why it cannot be considered as the mere rescue of a “forgotten memory“, as its promise of veracity claims. It is precisely these translations and aestheticization processes that make *Aquí están* such an interesting intervention. What is highlighted here is precisely the abundance of simultaneous and consecutive layers of mediation that are combined in the mobilization of memories, establishing itself as an emblematic example of the procedures and operations of memorialization in and by the arts.

Girls and Boys as Subjects of Memory

One of the main things at stake in *Aquí están* is the transmission of testimonies from the older generations to the younger, creating a dialogue between generations. Di Girólamo herself states, “Each family went through a process of memorization both personal and collective so as to bring their relatives back to life in their everyday things” (Di Girólamo 2013a). The procedure designed by Di Girólamo to generate the narratives, portraits and the final event is articulated around the idea of the transmission of a family memory that is not known or that requires a certain kind of repair.

The concern over the exchange and re-elaboration of memories across generations was established as one of the recurrent issues in the context of the fortieth anniversary commemoration of the coup. One of the factors that presumably explains the persistence of this issue is the generational turnover that happens over four decades and allows society to overcome the cultural trauma’s latency period. That latency period of cultural trauma is no doubt related to the generational relay: forty years after the coup, the generations born under democracy begin to gain importance, even in the political arena. As Aleida Assmann (2010, 41-42) states:

Social memory does not change gradually but undergoes a perceptible shift after periods of around 30 years when a new generation enters into offices and takes over public responsibility. Together with its public presence, the new generation will authorize its own vision of

history. The change of generations is paramount for the reconstruction of societal memory and the renewal of cultural creativity.

For the first time, and with great insistence, the question of how the younger generations understand the period of the civil military dictatorship (what they know, what their stance on it is and how they link it to the present) arose in different cultural, artistic and academic fields. The questions concerning the processes of transmission, activation and mobilization of memories seek not only to understand how that memory travels through the generations, but also to unveil the current politics of memory, which are reflected in the way the dictatorship period is taught in schools, in the way what is divulged by the media is actually grasped by the boys and girls of today, and how families tackle topics regarding the violent past.

The Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos was one of the institutions that most enthusiastically echoed the preoccupation with the intergenerational transmission of memories in the context of the fortieth anniversary commemoration of the coup. In fact, almost all the emblematic projects carried out by the Museum in 2013 had young people and children as protagonists. Its director at the time explained the reasons why the Museum embraced this curatorial line:

Memory cannot remain cloistered in the victims who lived through the traumatic experience, or in their relatives. The transition toward all their contemporaries and from one generation to the next is vital to accept the lessons of that painful past as part of a common body, so as to guarantee the “never again”. (Brodsky 2013, 7)

The study of so-called intergenerational (Reyes 2009; Assmann 2010) or trans-generational (Scapusio 2006) memories has established itself as one of the preferred topics in memory studies. Undoubtedly one of the most relevant contributions to the conceptualization of the procedures of memorial transference through generations is the notion of postmemory offered by Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012). As the author warns, the prefix “post-” does not directly point to a temporal gap, but to the effects that the memory elicits: postmemory is that memory which transmits consequences and implications for the present day to the generations that were not direct witnesses of past events. One of the most important

theoretical innovations in the notion of postmemory is the idea that the transmission of these experiences is emotionally rooted in the bodies and behaviours of the young; postmemory is, after all, an affective and embodied memory which is transferred beyond verbal discourse (Hirsch 2012). Hirsch proposes that the mediators of postmemory are the narratives as well as the photographs, the objects and the mediating behaviours that set up a constant process of intertextuality and mutual translation which results in the construction of an indirect, more fragmented memory, which challenges the possibilities of a narrativity that exceeds the scope of words. From this viewpoint, the relationship between postmemory and the past would not be mediated by the witness's narrative, but by the imagination, projection and creation that propel other kinds of semiotic artifacts.



Fig. 6. *Aquí están*. Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos

Hirsch's interest in the processes of imagination and cultural performance is extremely useful for analyzing the artistic intervention *Aquí están*, which proposes a device that at almost all levels incorporates postmemorial work. One first phase, the workshop, was organized in order to collect the testimonial narratives of the adults and to provide a creative space for the kids' portraits. The workshop is a protected event (both because of the time devoted to it, and because of the constant psychological advice the participants received) in which the older and

younger relatives could meet, confront each other and participate together in the postmemorial working through.

The workshop succeeds in dislocating the perception of a certain generational uniformity, eradicating the notion of generations as communities in which a common memory exists. The workshop does not consider adults and children as distinct collectivities that need to be confronted, but rather installs an inter-subjective and dyadic bridge that allows a collaborative working-through for the reconstruction of postmemories.

A second instance of postmemorial reconstruction in *Aquí están* ensues in the final event, in which the work carried out in the intimacy of the workshop was displayed in the forecourt before the gaze and presence of the spectators. When the actors and actresses read the narratives to “whoever wants to listen” (Pérez in Insunza 2013), a projection of private stories onto public space took place, contributing to the creation of a wider postmemory. The anchoring in personal and family stories invested these memories with affects that, when communicated in the public sphere, facilitated processes of identification. As Hirsch (2012, 33) suggests, postmemorial work “strives to reactivate and re-embodiment more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression”. In this way, postmemory can persist even when all the eye-witnesses and their direct descendants are no longer present. The movement from private to public is also enacted in the performative action itself, which moved from the intimacy of the initial reading, through the declamation of the testimonies at the microphone, and concluded with Salvador Allende’s emblematic speech. It is remarkable how the intervention uses precisely the transition from private to public as a vehicle for a more communal and shared cultural memory.

Aquí están accomplished an outstanding political re-definition of the category of childhood by envisioning girls and boys as subjects endowed with voice and body, capable of receiving memories, but also with the ability to establish a diachrony with future generations, positioning them as memory subjects. From the very first instances, the project considered the younger generations not only as recipients of memory, but as agents of it. Although in the first instance the adults were the ones who told the tales which the girls and boys “received”, the work that followed dealt precisely with positioning these girls and boys as co-agents of a memory that, rather

than being “transmitted”, must be reconstructed collaboratively. The generation that did not live through the dictatorship personally became, then, a generation that is capable of re-elaborating and mobilizing a memory which they did not experience. It is unusual for children to be called upon as legitimate political subjects in the construction of memories, or in this case, postmemory. The younger members of the families that suffered the disappearance of a relative acquire in this context a radical role in the responsibility that the mobilization of memories requires for the future. The children can demand their right to memory and, at the same time, become political subjects responsible for keeping that memory alive.

Micro-resistances against the Museumification of Memory

Aquí están took place in the Museo de la Memoria, probably the most emblematic place in the construction of a national narrative about the dictatorship. The contrast between the museumification of memory and the commemorative procedures of *Aquí están* was evident and significant. As Andreas Huyssen (1995, 16) puts it, the museumification of memory is a sort of antidote to the acceleration that characterizes late global capitalism, allowing it to “fulfill a vital anthropologically rooted need under modern conditions: it enables the moderns to negotiate and to articulate a relationship to the past”, a trend moved and sustained by mass culture and neo-liberalism. Unlike the enshrinement of memory which the Museum exercises, *Aquí están* was played out within the intimacy of inter-subjective interactions. The artistic gesture of Di Girólamo and Pérez echoed the feminist statement that asserts that what is private is political, bringing to a hegemonic space intimate and minimal stories of the victims’ relatives that are not always validated as significant memories. As a collaborative aesthetic practice, *Aquí están* proposed an alternative way to activate non-official stories, offering alternative means of political commitment. *Aquí están* was ultimately a sort of ritual of acknowledgment, where what is at stake is not the consolidation of a single memory, but the possibility of re-constructing a collective memory that turns out to be fragmentary, unstable, dynamic and multiple. This was accomplished by the construction of a temporality in progress that occurred in the context of the performative gathering. The simultaneous situation of production and reception of memories intensifies collective forms of construction that favour processes of recognition and belonging to the provisional and

transient community which this coexistence constructs. *Aquí están* constructed, then, a magnificent game of temporalities that involved all the participants as subjects of memory. When performing this manoeuvre, a responsibility towards the past is transferred between generations but, more importantly, a responsibility regarding the future that looms as a shared horizon is constructed.

Aquí están was a form of action, collaboration and resistance whose political effectiveness lay in the expansion of the responsibility toward the future. Its range was that of “small scale resistances” (Bal 2011), understood as micro-resistance that does not operate at the level of greater social structures (like the museum), but is situated in the intimate and at times minimal space of inter-subjective relationships, where what is relevant is the dialogue, the mutual listening, companionship and solidarity. And that is exactly what *Aquí están* offered: as Di Girólamo (in Insunza 2013) said, it made it possible “for the people to connect emotionally with the detained and disappeared and to question, once again: Where are they?”

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