

At night, lightening *

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ABSTRACT: We were invited by Gitanjali Dang and Christopher Schenker to participate in the Draft Project, an initiative that explores contemporary art that produces, contributes or provokes public debate. The project involved nine teams around the world that worked for twelve months in their local contexts: Beijing, Cairo, Cape Town, Hamburg, Honk Kong, Mexico City, Mumbai, St. Petersburg and Zurich. In our case, Mexico City was conformed by Helena Chávez Mac Gregor, Cuauhtémoc Medina and the artistic collective Teatro Ojo. For us, one of the questions raised by the *Draft* project was how to intervene within a public sphere swamped by images of violence that unlike creating a space to produce a collective thought subdues into the effects of its own violence. The local configuration of the public sphere happens as if we are isolated, staring at the catastrophe without any words to say. The images that circulate, normalized, are no longer able to open up our eyes. Its saturation no longer lights up anything. Teatro Ojo's intervention attempts to produce a different order, sense or formation, by circulating publicly a bunch of different images. Montages trying to turn back to the public sphere –either TV or social network- and appear with the shape of lightning bolts, to establish in its sequence possible new relations. This text is the recounting of the process that lead us to *At night, lightening*.

KEYWORDS: images, lightening, public sphere, public space.

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1. In the beginning was uncertainty...

It is fair to say that “public art”, probably more than any other department of cultural production, has become a field pregnant with endless uncertainties. The lively disagreement that the participants of the *Draft* conference in Bombay in 2015 experienced when faced with their different approaches to the notion of “public art”, may not be entirely stitched through a forceful agreement in terms of categories such as “the public sphere”, “public space”, “publicity” or “the public thing of the republic” not only because of the dislocation of north and south political discourses and practices of political interaction, but simply because of the impossibility of locating a separate fixed category for a matter of contingent destination.

It is hard to define a field of “public art” practice as a specific direction of contemporary culture in part because the overall politicization of artistic practices makes it redundant, and also because it does not seem possible to feign a specialized technique, modality of operation and/or genre devoted to the public side of art to be distinguished from also apparently “private” practices or those purely related to a tautological self critical value.

Once back in Mexico, found us full of doubts and concerns on which could be the next step in the project. We were very aware of the importance that in our social milieu a number of public gestures and images had in a particularly difficult and stressed moment of local politics, traversed by the perpetual cycle of political and criminal violence that could be seen in the all too visible deterioration of all kinds of political institutions faced with the advance of the drug dealers gangs, the encroachment of the new forms of exploitation of global capitalism, and the way the growing political dissatisfaction of wider circles of the population and the despair in the face of poverty and insecurity. All that, seemed to render any form of political participation both useless and urgent.

We were aware of the importance that visual practices have in the politics of mourning and protest in our country, and also of the way the nonmatrixed work of the Teatro Ojo group had involved the attempt to reroute the experience of theatre as a means to enhance the examination of the audience’s attitudes towards political life and in relation to the history of social movements. However we were clear that the questions raised by the *Draft* conference in Bombay demanded that the Teatro Ojo group would somehow experiment to rethink its possible role in the self-referential critique of the artistic modalities of public art intervention. That it had to hint on the possibility of serving to both a practical and theoretical self-questioning, and if possible to the advance of so far unforeseen venues of activity and possibility.

While in the past a specific set of circumstances (a certain anniversary, the proximity of a political moment, or the demand of the state of affairs of the country) was a necessary part of Teatro Ojo’s practice, we were now faced with a somehow abstract demand of producing a work that rather than answering to a specific circumstance, would involve questions that at other time in history one would have called as methodological insofar that they pertain to accounting for the status of “public art” rather than to those occasions that provoke a public intervention.

Draft expected from each of its participants to produce a local symposium, conference and/or academic event to review the situation of the issues of “the public” nature of art in the present. Facing with the task of contributing to a project that, not by chance, had been titled “draft”, we decided to use such conference as a form of academic essay/rehearsal. Rather than indulging in our hesitations and doubts, by addressing them in a paper or document, we decided to turn those

academic concerns into a theatrical/scholarly experience. Teatro Ojo and its collaborators decided to intervene, hijack or subvert that conference to render it as an invitation to perform and debate, to act and think in public, to question the condition of the Mexican public and social predicament of the day, under a clearly defined theatrical apparatus.

We invited Ana María Martínez de la Escalera, Antonio Marvel, Dolores González Saravia, Ileana Diéguez, Carlos Amoraes y Buró Fantasma, Federico Navarrete, José Luis Barrios, José Antonio Cordero, Cráter Invertido, Elia Baltazar, Israel Martínez, Nadia Lartigue, Juan Francisco Maldonado y Esthel Vogrig y Manuel Hernández. Different heterogeneous participants (activists, journalists, historians, philosophers and artists of different kinds) to use the stage to respond to an invitation consisting in a set of images that, in our view, summarized to a great extent the experience of the trouble times we were living in the country. This “Atlas of flashes”, that included both press and social media images and short films, were to be a point of departure for the guests interventions, without further instructions or specifications. We decided to name the event after a particularly revealing and painful phrase, “and many of images came to me...”. Those were the words that Marissa Mendoza used to describe her reaction when she first saw the image of the faceless corpse of her husband, student/activist Julio Cesar Mondragón, as it appeared on Facebook the fateful night of September 25th 2014, the day the students of the Ayotzinapa School in Guerrero were kidnapped by the local police of Guerrero:

Various photographs were uploaded on the Internet, on Facebook, among them, the one of Julio César. Then, since I recognised his clothes, recognised part of his body and everything, I discovered that it was him. [...] I felt very sad that I would never see Julio César again and many images came to me, like if I had been there with him at the moment when they did that to him, that they removed his face entirely, while he was alive, torturing him in the cruellest manner, because he did not have any bullet holes, only many blows, on his chest, his waist, his hands. (Arteaga, A., 2014)

As I hope you would appreciate, we were on purpose hoping to share with our participants the burden of trying to explore the predicament of defining the value of culture and art in relation to the worst possible circumstances. We explicitly understood the locus of the image as key to the experience of the republic, at one of the darkest and most painful moments in modern history. As I tried to argue in a paper titled “A Landslide of images” that was published in this Journal a year ahead and printed in the booklet that served as program to the event, we understood that images were part of the texture of the event, that in fact the forces of the images traversed our political experience:

We are not in the territory of art but in that of the overflowing passions of the public sphere: in an interchange of faces always harried by the possibility that the observer decides to join those as ‘one more.’ Naturally, a mobilisation is not made by a series of visual objects, but by bodies and the signs that traverse those bodies. Yet even so, it appears to me to be difficult to argue against one of the characteristics of the mobilisations that traverse the grave social crisis of Mexico of this decade, is the ascertainment of the clashes of the visual imagination and the dispute to control this space of intervention. The setting in motion of a political field inhabited by ghost effigies. (Medina, 2015).

The event that took place between January 21th and 22th 2016 at the MUAC Museum theatre, with a significant audience, involved a rare and at times unbearable mixture of academic thinking, actual civic mourning, political expression, and even a number of neodada acts and brutal parody sketches. At times laughter was mixed with indignation and tears were not far away from the difficult task of thinking. It was cathartic and hesitant, intelligent and emotional, hopeless and challenging if not offensive at times. A whole array of forms of cultural response in hope of sharing amongst us both the certainty of darkness and the hope of a certain illumination.

2 Thunderstorm

To a certain extent, during the January Forum, the Teatro Ojo group and its associates had restricted their role to that of spectators and producers of the event. We had concocted and produced a theater in pursuit of ideas, hoping to come out of the event ready to engage into a new work that we could not fathom on our own, delegating theory and inspiration to the magic of the stage. A certain faith in the creativity of others had induced us to transfer our questions on the nature of our role on the public sphere to our colleagues and friends, but instead of coming with fresh inspiration we had been challenged.

By the end of the Forum, as you may have witnessed in the film, psychoanalyst Manuel Hernández felt the need of interpellate us, artists and fellow travellers with a rather worn out issue: how could we escape from the confines of the art world and the academia to address a real audience? How could we infiltrate the actual public sphere, and start changing the culture of the times seemingly dominated by the epics of violence and the propaganda of fear?

It would be pointless to discuss if Manuel Hernández's question was pertinent, and if his argument was academically sound. As a good intervention, it was more interesting for its outcome than for its premises and internal logic. It provoked an internal discussion between curator Helena Chávez and the members of the Teatro Ojo group and me that at one point became so heated that practically provoked a schism. It was only when one of us got enraged and threatened to leave the project that, in a flash of collaboration between artists and theorists, an answer to "what was to be done" emerged. We clearly saw that the strategy of provoking thought and questioning through the distribution of public images was powerful, and that rather than transmitting arguments and theories, we could produce a number of provocations that would be both intellectually and affectively challenging by appropriating the model of the TV advertising or clip. Why not distribute political messages of a poetic/political kind as advertisement interrupting either in TV or You Tube programs? Short narratives, some of which had to be graphic and nonsensical in kind, like many of the performative moments in the forum, could be introduced as paid advertisement through You Tube, and hopefully also we could convince a public TV station to do the same and occupy with this kind of unforeseen content the empty space left between movies, series and documentaries. The idea of the image as a lightening in the midst of the night served us to give identity to those materials. Mimicking the new publicity strategies of capitalism, which occupy the interspaces of entertainment to sell commodified ways of living and thinking, we understood the possibility of recovering the land between the waves of video in TV or the internet or social media, as a means to share with the audience our awareness of living within a political space of images. In other words, we toyed with the idea of using the hunger for "content" in new media as a form of political illumination.

While the Teatro Ojo group started to devise the different short ads, in a format that goes between 30 to 60 seconds, and worked to either clear out or circumvent the copyright issues involved, and in fact invited back several of the collaborators of the forum to share the task of producing content in this new format, Helena Chávez and I came to negotiate with the University public TV channel to find broadcast space for the series. We were lucky to find a warm reception from the new director of the University Channel, Nicolás Alvarado, who is aware of the way the old monopolistic notion of TV channel is historically dead and the need of rethinking public television as a matter of a heterogeneous platform of production and distribution of an equally diverse manifold of content.

So far Teatro Ojo has produced 44 clips, in collaboration with filmmaker Rafael Ortega. The element in common of all those clips is their unpredictable nature: they project the shadow of a possible video consumer, active enough to rethink his or her position to the present in terms of belonging to a republic made of shared commotions and conflicts. These are signatures of light in the void: ghosts of intelligence in the midst of historical loss.

3 Beyond geometry

“The square and the sphere.” Almost unheard as proper unconscious associations are, an implicit geometry defines our concepts of “the public”. As some of the debates of this project attest, we seem to be frequently entrapped by the archetypal definitively of our traditional concepts of “the public”. Seduced by the mythology of the Agora in Athens, the Forum in Rome or the Commune of Italian cities in the Renaissance, the public square appears to us as the site where the presence of bodies in the open gives some materiality to the assumption that our social systems are still political and civic in relation of the understanding of the city as the referent of all kinds of politics, somehow turning the square into the natural theatre of historical action and discourse. Those against the bidimensional nature of such spatiality find themselves seduced by the music of the public spheres: the view that modern bourgeois societies were born forms the institutionalization and technological implementation of public opinion and debate. The politics of the sphere had, certainly, a more immaterial condition than the old fashioned idea of a physical space of civic convergence: it suggested a continuously expanding volume of interactions and operations, a sort of virtual planet growing along the physical extension of the earth.

A common characteristic of both sceneries was the presumption of light and air: squares appear more emancipatory during the day, when they feel vibrant with the vigorous sounds of the crowd and the dialectic of speeches, ovations, banners and anthems which turn rallies into popular festivities. Whereas the idea of a square in the night suggests the either danger of repression or the epics of revolutionary upheaval that occupy the public space as a defiance of the powers to be. Instead the public sphere appears in our imagination as a weightless, transparent and clear bubble of air and light as Hieronymus Bosch’s visionary erotic natural receptacles. The size of a public sphere is unfathomable: it can involve either the whole world or a drop of transparency floating in water with two joyous bodies inside in the garden of delights. But then again the sphere does not appear to exist in the night. The thin almost nonexisting membrane that separates it from the world magically disappears, leaving us into the chaotic silence of the void. The whole point of the metaphor of “the enlightenment” relies on the ambition of extending light until it covers the world, by means of the ever-unstoppable generalization of reason, fact based judgment and cosmopolitanism. Glass spheres do not have hidden dirty corners, neither strange passages nor underground caves. Their wholehearted ambition is the triumph of geometry of transparency.

When an electric storm pierces the darkness of the night, there is only a second of visibility, way too short to allow the viewer a proper understanding of the landscape. Lightening is not the enlightenment: its flashes shine as an exception, more effective in terms of the afterimage it produces in our eyes than in creating a properly illuminated geography. Rarely do such shinings provide a route of escape or a full strategic view of the horizon. At most, the fluttering crossing of images gives rise to insistent ghosts. Rather than offering an open space of reflection and observation, of data and debate, the crossing of light in the darkness feeds the awareness of poetry and dream of imprinted images. The analogy the old fashioned photographic plate is particularly right. As both chemical and electric flashlight suggest, photographic techniques grew haunted by the phantom of the flashlight breaking into the perfect darkness of the camera obscura. The single and incomplete shade left by a flash lightning and the afterimages of a storm have an element in common: the trace they leave in our thought and imagination are deeper and last longer than experience. They are sort of immaterial effigies and statues: monuments to the fleeting second of illumination, arresting the light and movement, preventing the flow of time and things and words. Very much like a trauma, they are not only somehow permanent, they are constantly in danger of being invoked and called upon a new fleeting image akin to their singularity.

In a great part of the earth today, subjected to the foul political landscape of the postcolonial mimicking of democracy and the masquerade of global world order, squares and spheres have been seized by different shades of darkness. We live

times characterized by democratdictators, elected demagogues, and consensus builders of social and neoliberal economic tyrannies. A combination of media control and all pervading global scepticism, combined at times with an endless variety of forms of contemporary nihilism, conspire to turn the sphere of debate and criticism outmoded and helpless.

Reasoning and critique fall constantly pray of the seduction of advertisement and the propaganda of fear. As both the recent advances of right wing populism in places like the USA and UK, and the conspirational moods of real and staged coups in places like Turkey and Brazil would suggest the control of current societies relies more on hysterical affects and representations than in reasoning and fact. A politics of enlightenment risks turning merely into an elite cultural formation.

Horrible as it appears to our sensibilities, the only politics of resistance that seems to take hold of the social imagination is a mixture of anxiety and identification. It's either based on at least a mild form of millenarianism as with the climate change fears, or in case of despair they are based on the reprocessing of drama. At times it would seem to be that the more the representation of politics as corruption prevails, the more space there is for the idea that the only possible means of achieving legitimacy is the personal proximity to tragedy. Old-fashioned charisma is easily replaced today by the exhibition of victimhood. In places like Mexico where the role of public intellectuals used to guarantee a certain degree of honesty and purity in the public realm, that role has been transferred to the relatives of those killed or disappeared. The only trustworthy energy to be found in the public sphere is bereavement and the call of unattainable justice. Under such conditions there would appear to be no room in political life that does not have to do with a need to address the violence and corruption of the era. We are locked in a moment where requiem and parodies appear as the only possible poetic modalities available.

In the midst of such territory, to recur to images to provoke moments of thought may imply a desperate attempt to challenge what counts as the sources of social excitement. It does not procure so much logic of preaching and conversion, so as to share with the casual viewer a moment of casual recognition where two isolated intelligences find them tied up by both the concern on the paucity of the historical moment and the hope of sharing a more intelligent mediascape. For such lighting not only reveals that we are not so isolated in darkness but also that there is still space in between ourselves that is not entirely colonized by pathos and manipulation, but that maybe occupied by a different sort of sound and light.

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