



Brújula
Volume 12 • 2018

Travesía Crítica

*Genealogies, Narratives, Archives: The Challenges of Writing a
(Non-) History of Chilean Performance Art*

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González Castro, Francisco, Leonora López & Brian Smith. *Performance art en Chile*. Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2016. 276 pp.

The opening premise of *Performance art en Chile* is the acknowledgment of a methodological and ethical difficulty: how to account for four decades of performance art in Chile (1970-2000) in a way that is faithful and non-dogmatic, while admitting that, often times, the historical exercise leads to the taking of arbitrary decisions and to the shaping of consensual narratives? When accounting for a medium that primarily developed in reaction against political authoritarianism in the country, how can one preserve the subversive – and, at times, paradoxical – density of its actions? Is it possible

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to write in a way that does not “misconstrue what performance art is and has been”? (23) In order to tackle these challenges, the three authors have, following the works of Nietzsche and Foucault, replaced the term *history* by that of *genealogies*, defining it as an analytical method that “differs from that of the traditional historian or theorist, in that it rejects processes that follow a linear logic of cause and effect with univocal results. Rather [...] it takes into account both the conditions specific to the researcher as well as the context(s) specific to the object of study” (31).¹ Writing these genealogies of performance art will therefore entail considering the historical, social, as well as affective contexts of both authors and artists.

The book divides itself into three main sections. The first entitled “Lo General” draws in broad brushes the history of performance art in Europe and the United States, starting with the rise of the historical avant-gardes; and in Latin America as well as in Chile before 1970. This last sub-section is undoubtedly the most interesting, as it identifies a strong affinity between the urban tradition of oral poetry and the organisation of the first performances in Chile by a varied group of artists, poets and writers including Nicanor Parra, Enrique Lihn and Alejandro Jodorowsky. If these three paved the way for the emergence of performance art, it is the artists Juan Downey and Francisco Copello who are crowned as the real forefathers of performance art in Chile here even though, ironically enough, both spent most of their career outside of the country.

The second section of the book focuses on a period ranging from 1970-2000 and constitutes the main body of the book’s survey. It examines the rise of performance before and after the military *golpe* and the emergence of the neo-avant garde movement

¹ All translations from Spanish are by the author of this review.

known as *Escena de Avanzada*. In its sub-division, the section discusses performance in relation to its engagement with the body, the production of residual images, technology and participation. In this section, the authors draw a precise timeline of actions and interventions: some well-known and others more obscure. At the same time, they also contest some of the narratives produced by critics of these years, taking issue with the writings of Nelly Richard and Justo Pastor Mellado in particular, and their portrayal of Carlos Leppe as a pioneer of performance art in the country: a claim that, according to the authors, is largely mystified and voluntarily erases from history the works of artists such as Francisco Copello.

The third section of the book seeks to study the reception of these works at the time of their conception in intellectual circles, the institutional sphere of museums and galleries and the general public. Here, the authors rightly argue that performance art constituted during the decades of the dictatorship a highly endogamous practice whose main audience was the same group of artists, writers and critics to whom the performers themselves belonged. The rest of the world – the mainstream press and the general public – did not understand nor care for these works deemed provocative, obscene or downright opaque. While this diagnosis is true to an extent, it fails to take into consideration the way in which some gestures developed by artists active during this time were later recuperated and redeployed by the general public and citizen groups in order to voice their own political message. This is the case for instance of the *NO+* action first staged by CADA in 1983, and which, in the following years, became one of the rallying cries of the fight against the Pinochet regime and one of the most efficient visual strategies associated with the “No” campaign during the 1989 plebiscite. While mentioning CADA’s action, the

authors of this book nevertheless ignore the delayed effect that this action had in extra-artistic, pro-democratic circles and, thus, restrict its field of impact.

In a final appendix, the authors comment on the status of the archive in accounting for performance art. The archive, they argue, plays a crucial role in letting artists enter dominant narratives. This is especially so in Chile where so much of the writing on art seems to be done on a basis of personal affinity and yet, are endlessly repeated as truth. “We put emphasis on this particularity of the archive because we noticed that in many texts on the history of contemporary art in Chile, the same works, artists, ideas and citations are repeated and, through this reiteration become crystallized, turning them into the icons of reality at the time” (241). It is a well-known fact that history functions according to its own performative logic, justifying the hegemony of dominant narratives by their recurrence. In this sense, bringing intelligibility to lesser-known archives seems to acquire a reparative dimension for the authors. While laudable, the position of this methodological clarification in the final section of the book is unfortunate and one would have wished to find it weaved into the book’s main discussion rather than left for the end, like an after-thought.

By and large, the main contribution provided by this publication pertains to its effort to provide an accurate timeline of events composing the history of performance art in Chile, bringing intelligibility to a scene which, in the country, has often suffered from a lack of minute registering, leading to confusion, mistaken dates and contradictory accounts. Similarly, the authors’ ambition to bring to light some performance artists who, for a various set of reasons – some of them briefly outlined here – did not make it to the canon of the Chilean neo-avant-garde ought to be applauded. Here is also the rub, though.

By seeking to be as inclusive as possible, the book lacks critical depth that would allow the reader to understand some of the recurrent topics explored by these artists. In their inclusion of performances dealing with the land as a metaphor for embodied life and political duress for example, the authors list key figures such as Raul Zurita, Carlos Leppe, Elias Adasme, Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis and Lotty Rosenfeld. At no point however, does this accumulation lead to a critical discussion of the central role played by the theme of territory in the performances of these years. It is a pity, for having done so would provide an interesting way to identify continuity in the history of performance art in Chile. It would, for instance, have allowed the authors to identify an additional pre-1970 genesis to performance in Chile in the poetic *phalènes* and *travesías* organized by the Escuela de Arquitectura de Valparaíso in the late 1950s and 60s. Staged in Europe and later on in Latin America, the performances of this group of artists, poets and architects under the leadership of Godofredo Iommi resorted to performative strategies to rethink the American continent in utopian terms. Similarly, taking the territorial metaphor as their guide would have allowed the authors to make better sense of the formative experience played by exile and the distance from the home country (whether imposed or chosen) in the work of some of the artists they discuss (Cecilia Vicuña, Juan Downey, Francisco Copello). Even more so and even though it runs beyond the temporal scope set by the authors, acknowledging the relevance of the territorial metaphor in these practices would have provided them the opportunity to situate themselves in these subjective genealogies they claim to be drawing. It is indeed important to note that one of the authors Francisco González, and Lucy Quezada who penned one of the prologues, both belong to the performance collective *Charco* which, in the past years, has been

active in using performance to question the Chilean government's inaction in some of the country's most marginal areas.

In the introduction to the book, the authors themselves insist on the open-ended and incomplete nature of their research, which was carried out during a restricted two-years period. While it is fair to praise the merits of this much needed endeavour, the absence of thorough and critical discussion of the works surveyed makes it more a useful chronological and – yes – historical handbook than a truly original academic contribution to the existing discussions on performance art in Chile. For this, the writings of scholars such as Sebastian Vidal, Carla Macchiavello, Fernanda Carvajal and the research and curatorial collective Red Conceptualismos del Sur on specific artists and tendencies in performance art would be more adequate references.