



The space of the absent

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ABSTRACT

During the feminist march on March 8, 2019 in Santiago, Chile, a group of women carried out an intervention called “Espacio de las ausentes” (Space of the absent) in which the arrangement of the bodies showed and stressed the presence of the absent bodies from the demonstration, particularly of the women murdered by patriarchal violence. The phrase is flashy and could sound like an oxymoron. How can a space be filled by absent subjects? How can absent subjects appear? In this text we ask ourselves about the affective implications that this type of use of public space has on bodies and collectivities. Analysing a photography took at the demonstration, we argue that the space that emerges from the co-presence of the bodies, present and absent, and of materialities, is one that is more porous to a multiple capacity to affect and be affected that recognises and makes present situations of exclusion and oppression.

1. Introduction

During the feminist march on March 8, 2019, in Santiago, Chile, a group of women carried out an intervention called *Espacio de las ausentes* (Space of the absent) in which the arrangement of bodies sought to expose and stress the presence of absent bodies from the demonstration, particularly those of women murdered by patriarchal violence. The intervention moved through the flow of the march and, at different moments, it intervened by occupying the space of the demonstration to create another one, the one of the absents. Through this brief essay, we will argue that the analysis of the intervention provides some insight into the capacity of bodies in public space and how insurgent uses, in particular feminist public interventions, might dispute regimes of institutionalised appearance and raise awareness of situations of exclusion. We claim that the *Espacio de las ausentes* intervention exemplifies ways through which non-present bodies can be constitutive of the emerging present space, and allows insight to be gained into the dynamics of the ongoing contestations of the right to be present or absent. (Fig. 1).

The photograph that accompanies this text shows a group of women holding hands, linked around a rope, holding up and highlighting a white poster with the phrase “ESPACIO DE LAS AUSENTES” (space of the absent) written in black capital letters. Arranged as a sort of roundabout of women, they look to the centre and each other at the

same time, and prevent the rest of the protesters from entering this bodily, materially demarcated space, which is nothing more than the asphalt portion of the main road artery that runs through the capital Santiago, Alameda Avenue. On the pavement one can read, also in capital letters but this time in white, the phrase “POR LAS QUE NO ESTÁN” (for those who are not here), under which is found a drawing of a cracked heart.

We are surrounded by absences that “make things”, absences that affect and accompany us along with our lives. Severin Fowles (2010: 28) refers to the capacity of absences in terms of the performativity they entail. In his own words: “Absences push back and resist. They prompt us into action. And like present things, absences also have their distinctive affordances and material consequences that are not only before meaning but can, of their own accord, direct the process of signification itself.” This understanding of absence is insightful in the sense that it allows the questioning of how absence affects us and how it is constitutive of the present and our everyday experience. At the same time, such an approach to absence allow accounting for conditions of exclusion and oppression. In this sense, we follow Meier’s idea that an in-depth examination of absence “can provide stimulating vectors of analysis” (Meier et al., 2013: 423).

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2. The work of absences

Following Jacques Derrida (1967; also see Trujillo, 2016) we can ask if it is possible to imagine an absence without reference to a presence: a presence that, at the same time, describes and performs a specific reality. In the case of the *Espacio de las ausentes*, the intervention constitutes an assembly of elements that brings to the present the absence of the missing women. In this sense, it can be argued that the experience of absence is constituted through the relations that signify it and transform it into the present matter. The absence is something that is realised and “is something performed, textured and materialised through relations and processes, and via objects” (Meyer, 2012: 103). At the same time, “presence and absence exist in unstable and sometimes unexpected relationships” (Parr et al., 2016:67). As Meier states “absence is part or result of contestations and negotiations” and is “interwoven with present experiences, with social interactions and negotiations of positions in the social field” (Meier et al., 2013: 425–6). But the absences need memories to obtain life as well as support in the socio-material world that can update them.

The experience of the absence, in other words, constantly emerges in the present through how individuals and groups relate to it and to the diverse materialities that compose the landscape of memory (Frers, 2013; Madrell, 2013; Parr et al., 2016). This way of understanding the absence suggests a variety of possibilities to relate to it. As we argue in this text, the production of experiences and stories of the absence through defined spatial and situated performances can open up new spaces for representation. This notion has been developed thoroughly in the case of disappeared detainees during dictatorships and authoritative regimes in the Southern cone. For instance, Fernando Bosco (2004) delves into the geographies of the commemoration of *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* to argue that different spatial practices emphasise different and sometimes conflictive versions of the construction of memory. Vikki Bell (2010) in turn delves into how the uses of images might be considered as forms of biopolitics insofar as they are used to dispute the way populations are governed and to oppose the denial and invisibility of certain bodies. Oriana Bernasconi and Marcela Ruiz (2018) outline a strategy to examine the various ways through which the social sustenance of

suspended existences and liminal subjects is materialised. Through archival work and textual analysis, graphic and scenic artifacts, the authors track the structure that has sustained the disappeared detainee in Chile, conceding them different statuses and capacities. This strand of work converges around the idea that it is necessary “to see absence not as an existing ‘thing’ in itself but as something that is made to exist through relations that give absence matter” (Meyer, 2012:107). Consequently, we must provide ourselves with the tools to face “the unstable epistemological status of absences” (Meier et al., 2013: 426).

The absent are a part of the material world, but at the same time, they are “foreign to this world” (Fowles, 2010: 39). In this sense, the intervention of the space of the absent assumes the task of showing the absence through an incomplete and unstable articulation and that, in the function of these same characteristics, it encourages us to act in a manner that completes and stabilises: an evocative and memorial act.

3. Pragmatics of the artistic intervention

The phrase “space of the absent” is flashy and could sound like an oxymoron. How can space be filled by absent subjects? How can absent subjects appear? The phrase refers to a space that belongs to someone (“de” in Spanish, “of” in English) that requires the use of a feminine pronoun (“las” in Spanish, “the” in English). This unnamed someone is not there and it acquires its nominal condition of this same absence: “the absent”. The space belongs to someone who is not here. But the phrase also seems noteworthy because it is a part of an intervention that plays with indexicality. Indeed, “space of the absent” is a phrase that refers to a state of things that is produced in the relational action of bodies and materialities, of a group of women who move in a measured way and that make up a space and, in this sense, the phrase does not refer to a state of pre-existing things but to a state that emerges with them, to the pragmatic nature of its condition as an act of writing.

The scarcity and simplicity of a text used in this setting can be seen as an intervention that seeks to avoid the delivery of an explicit, unambiguous and stable meaning and that, rather, intends to become a sort of irritation or interference (LaBelle, 2019). In turn, the text unleashes and makes visible, not stabilised meanings, but potentials of action and



Fig. 1. Espacio de las ausentes intervention, March 8, 2018. Image courtesy of Rebeca Silva-Roquefort.

interpretation, updating potentials of time (Imhoff et al., 2016) and space. Notwithstanding that on first sight one might think that the phrase “space of the absent” has a labeling function, this phrase produces space and enacts a reality. The sign with the aforementioned phrase is not placed outside the space of the absent, but it is a component of it, just as the string, the pavement and the bodies of the women are. An interesting effect of analogy to explore arises here, because the phrase written on the poster is there, waiting to be modulated by some of its readers, while the dynamic spatiality performed by the bodies can also modulate a surface; it contracts and expands because to the joint action of the women in the roundabout.

In this way, we can ask ourselves about the type of observer that is enacted by the performance and, in consequence, it is relevant to consider the context of occurrence of the latter, and that it is none other than the feminist march of 8M. This is a particular context that, very rapidly, we could qualify as a “safe space”, that is, a relational context in which women felt safe in the collective, with the possibility to express themselves freely and without the restrictions that are imposed by the commitments of quotidian life, and especially the male gaze.

It is this “safe space” that interpellated us—the authors of this text—into the production of a narrative that contributes to the understanding of this situated performance in relation to the rationalities that produced its possibility (Bell, 2010). By doing this, we contribute to give social sustenance (Bernasconi and Ruiz, 2018) for a phenomenon that patriarchal society insists on making invisible.

Otherwise, this safe space allowed women to feel protected and to have freedom of action. It gave the possibility of taking the time to be, to share, and to observe. In this context, the space of the absent appears. It appears relatively stealthily, but then it acquires presence. This is because it is a mobile intervention, which can be expanded or contracted based on the coordination of the women who compose it. It is this expansive nature that suggests that it is an intervention of the proxemic that seeks to involve those present, seeks to establish visual and tactile contact with those who are there, present, to make them part of the staging. Thus, we are facing an intervention that shows the embodied performativity announced by Judith Butler (2017) in all its power, insofar as it is the assembled bodies that put political signifiers at stake beyond the discourse and, at the same time, enable a specific understanding of the collective.

Furthermore, we must add that the women who were part of the performance were silent once the roundabout circle shown in the photograph was formed. This is an element that must be considered as it suggests certain care and solemnity is transmitted to the spectators while, at the same time, an introspective attitude is suggested. This silent attitude can be considered as a way of inverting the usual narrative and giving the word to the absent ones (Delacroix, 2020), to those whose memories do not have channels to be represented (Curti, 2008). In its intensity and transience, the intervention seeks to shape what is seen and what is said, as well as “who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (Rancière, 2004, 13). A “‘politics of presence’ [that] does not fit in the field of essentialist representations, but rather in the order of everyday experiences and actions” (Aedo, 2017: 100). The absence is experienced in “lived experience” (Meier et al., 2013: 424). Even more, “the experience of absence derives its peculiar power from its embeddedness in the body, in bodily practices, sensual perceptions and emotions” (Frers, 2013: 2).

In this direction, it can be argued that the space of the absent looks to enact an involved and attentive viewer, with a situated spatial consciousness and an expanded temporal consciousness; an observer who activates and employs its memorial and evocative potentials. In this same logic, the space of the absent takes hold of a relational space, a point of encounter of the bodies, a “field of interaction” (LaBelle, 2010, xvii) that enables a flow between the present and absent individuals who interfere in the steady flow of the patriarchal system. But, as we said before, this is not done by giving a clear meaning, but rather through a kind of irritation or interference that activates potentials.

In this sense, a key element of the potential of a performance is its ability to maintain within itself the possibility of liminality, of producing a moment of uncertainty (Schechner, 2002), or of surprise (Benjamin, 1978), which allows an opening to the consideration of other possibilities, to the affectation and, in some cases, to change. The “space of the absent” thus becomes a sort of space in action which leads to the emergence and expression of forms of subjectivity not foreseen by the framework of the proper meaning of the march. The space of the absent works as an intervention that might catalyse new versions of the self and, in this way, expand the possibilities for politics (Hooykaas, 2017).

A space in action means that it is not simply a text, a discourse, or a monument, but a joint, practical making that, beyond the representational effects that it might have, it implies a joint making of the bodies of the spectators involved. Following Banu Gökarkınel and Sara Smith (2017), these are crucial sites for dissonance as an embodied politics of resistance.

We think it is important to stop here for a moment and return to the approaches made by Rancière, specifically those in his book “The Distribution of the Sensible”, where he criticises the tendency to look at art and politics as two separated fields of thinking. On the contrary, to Rancière, the specificity and the common of art and politics is that both imply “the suspension of the rules that govern normal experience (...) [and] an innovative leap of logic that normally govern human situations” (Corcoran, 2010: 1) Rancière calls this interruption through suspension “dissent”. Contrary to the notion of “consensus” as the definition of what is right and the normal order of things, art and politics interrupt the consensus by verifying the presumption of equality in different ways.

A fundamental point for the philosopher is that the recovery of ownership demands – to be heard, seen, recognised and to produce a change in perception in the social space – must acquire meaning through sensorial experience (Rancière, 2009). This is how politics turns to the challenge of disturbing or interrupting the existing distribution of the sensible. In other words, all the actions that “act on” and transform the social space are necessarily aesthetic, as there is no way that they can be carried out in a non-sensuous manner, or, as pointed out by Žižek (2004), any emancipatory radical policy is necessarily and inherently aesthetic. Aesthetic political acts constantly erase the limits between what is acceptable and what is not, what is possible and what is not, what is political and what is not, and so on (Aytekin, 2017) and this is done “inwardly” within the community as it is done “outwardly” from the social space that it disputes.

Besides, and as Attila Aytekin (2017) is emphatic in contending, social movements can overcome class distinctions through the incorporation of aesthetic political acts. Referencing the case of the protests in June 2013 in the town square of Gezi in Turkey, the author argues that the artistic practices and the cultural symbols used in the repertoire of protesters are capable of overcoming the gap by bringing a large group of people to a common political position. Following Rancière’s work (2004), this shared position of the present individuals is based on the existence of an essential demand. In this way, the recovery of ownership movement is capable of expanding from its original space by producing new diverse spaces, where the streets and town squares are transformed into new spaces of political and aesthetical action and, at the same time, blurring the limits of what is political as it was proposed by Rancière (Celik, 2014).

The aesthetic political acts, such as “the space of the absent”, can become transformational when they are constituted as “actions that use the common field created by the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, to make egalitarian claims by those who are excluded in the distribution of the sensible, that are not allowed to participate” (Aytekin, 2017: 199). The aesthetic political acts affect a new distribution of the sensible and a concomitant subjectivisation of the anonymous or, in our case in particular, of the absence. This emerging distribution of the sensible is capable of questioning and integrating the essential recovery of ownership demand of temporary and spatial co-presence of women of different classes and other social and cultural differences.

The “space of the absent” is not only a phrase on a poster but the intervention as a whole. It has in this respect a commendable potency since, through a peculiar organisational outline –temporary, ephemeral, corporal – that arranges and guides glances and distances, it seeks to affect those who are in the flow of the march and thus produce a particular way of being-with-those-who-are-absent. These other absentees are the group of women who have disappeared as a result of patriarchal violence, in different times and places, which is summoned and made to appear by this ephemeral and material intervention. This disputes the patriarchal right to appearance and the oppressive conditions that female bodies experience in their presentation in the public space. Following Butler (2017: 15), the space of the absent is an intervention on the social norm that regulates the appearance of bodies in public space and, by doing so, slips an understanding and a pragmatic definition of who the collective subject is.

The power of affectation that the “space of the absent” had consisted in part in “directing the attention to the presence” (Bille et al., 2010: 4) by criticising the possibilities of the appearance of bodies. The absent became visible through a corporal activation that influences both those who were part of the intervention as well as their witnesses. Thus, it is created a significance of the present, of the *in situ* moment that seeks to re-socialise the individuals and to create new ways of perceiving, relating, and conceiving. The space that emerges from the co-presence of the bodies, present and absent, is one that is more porous to multiple affectations that recognises and makes present situations of exclusion and oppression and that appeals to the right to appear in the collective public space, as well as a feminine one. Furthermore, this space becomes a continuum between presence and absence that allows considering the affectation at present of those missing bodies; the limits of this constellation of bodies and materialities become porous and in a constant state of shock.

The “space of the absent” provides us “insight into ongoing contestations of the right to be present or absent” (Meier et al., 2013: 426) and is an invitation to connect sensorially, memorially, and bodily with others, and, as Butler states, to materialise the plural and performative right to appearance (2017: 18). Instead of adopting an “adversarial relationship with absent presences” (Wyatt et al., 2016: 38), the ESPA-CIO DE LAS AUSENTES welcomes absences as part of the very experience of what it is to be together present in space.

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