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Opinion / Opinión

Plazas

Francine Masiello

University of California at Berkeley

I want to begin by recalling an artistic event that captured international media attention in the spring of 2007. Spencer Tunick, a photographer based in New York, traveled to Mexico City to do a photo shoot of 17,000 *chilangos* whom he asked to disrobe in the public plaza. A plan to bring to public consciousness the Mexican modesty regarding the body, to remind everyone of the unrelieved pressure of Catholic mores, the nudie fest was a way to lift the veil of shame that held Mexicans locked in age-old traditions while, of course, providing ample material for avant-garde visual form. Certainly, Tunick had worked before with the subject of frontal nudity, with bodies stretched in the plazas of several major cities (7000 Spaniards had disrobed at an earlier moment; Cleveland had several thousand; and more recently, Tunick staged a nude photo shoot on a Swiss

glacier in protest of global warming). Nevertheless, the aerial perspective on Mexico's principal site for public meeting somehow struck me as rare not for its oppositional discourse, but in fact, for its complicity with the state. A site for mass congregation, a place known for fervid protest or flag-waving defense of nation, the *zócalo* now embraced bowed and curled-up figures, withdrawn in fetal form. The rally of popular voices, for which the *zócalo* is known, fell quiet; instead, we saw thousands of oval mounds belonging to an ensemble, spatial markers of scale and mass to signal the frame of the plaza. As such, they assumed the quality of frozen spectacle, almost a *tableau vivant*, as if copying some earlier canvas that we might have seen before (and I need to say, in this context, that the films of Leni Reifenstahl come to mind for images of mass mobilization under Hitler, and on the other end, Tina Modotti's aerial shots of marching *campesinos* as specters of public engagement. Tunick, in my opinion, achieved neither dimension.)

It has been said of the *tableau vivant*—the artwork within the frame—that reality hangs in suspense, “life gives itself as a spectacle to life” (Klossoski 100). The space refuses our intervention; it locks the protest in fixed blocks of meaning. The subjectivity of actors and viewers is frozen. And with it, the flow between nature and culture comes to a resounding halt. Removed from the image in Tunick's work is any sign of life that might exist beyond the plaza. So what do we make of these scenes? Was Tunick a cynical opportunist, entering the *zócalo* with a colonizer's eye? Did the project demand an expression of disclosure from Mexicans that Tunick would not have placed even on himself? Or is my view just an old-fashioned moralization cast under the guise of anti-colonial protest? What is certain is that the structure of government planning and the naked bodies were one: while what surrounds the frame—the popular hordes, the cluttered manifestations of *puesteros* on the *zócalo*'s edge—significantly fall out of sight.¹

¹ With this is always the question of what lay beyond the frame: while the bodies found their way into the camera lens of Tunick what remained excluded proved to be far more engaging. Around the *Zócalo*, the business of street vendors was being threatened with closure. Involving commerce of cheap toys and clothing in temporary stalls set up on the side streets, the *puesteros* have ignited fierce debate among Mexico City's middle classes. Many have objected to this cluttered manifestation of *lo popular* swarming the

Tunick excludes from his bird's eye view any sense of this tension-filled border conflict between the *zócalo* and surrounding streets. Instead, he keeps us trained on the square in order to focus on a singularity of his own invention. "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle," Guy Debord has told us (1995, 20). Indeed, at work in the public plaza, insofar as it is determined by the state, is a way to mark off perimeters with clearly ruled lines, to establish the authority of the frame, and to keep the visual text within the bounds of order. In this instance, both the state and the artist coincide in the monocular message. They uphold a rationality based on entrepreneurial decision, which appeals to an image of universal inclusion but at the same denies the separateness of each person's project. In this respect, the view of massification sustains neoliberal logic.

Here, I want to imagine the forces that might upset the spectacle and the frame and from there to speculate on alternatives for thinking through the public plaza leading to the prospectus of a loosely coordinated alliance based not on a singular vision, but on connections through multiple encounters. I depart, then, from a claim that the politics of the event lies in an art of the senses. The plaza not seen from the bird's eye view, but a space for multi-voiced art, a project founded on encounter and subliminal connections. A plaza that captures the political and poetic force of disruption, awakening us to a sentient world in which meaning is drawn from the material bodies that touch a commonality among us.

Plazas

Let me retrace my steps. The plaza has always been a space for governance and cultural citizenship. Fixed in form, the brilliant square announces the triumph of human control. It claims itself as the rational space of administrative power. Setha Low, in a beautiful book about plazas in Costa Rica, reminds us that public square is a metaphor for cosmology of the city (35), a testimony to the rule of governance, and if we follow the European model, a center for repression and control. Small wonder then that the populace takes its protest to the city square, to which citizens

city's center. Others claim that this, in fact, has nothing to do with popular culture at all, but is simply an outlet for mass commercial sales controlled by absentee bosses.

return again and again. It is as if the space of the plaza were there to confine social order, naturalizing our experience of public expression within fixed boundaries and rules. (Bourdieu 106).

Walter Mignolo convinces us of the explanation of space as a complex “calculus of time, space, memory, and semiotic codes” (1995 243), whose coordinated vectors allow one to speak from a particular place. He helps me think of the challenge that the structure of the plaza poses while it tries to contain the activity of all persons moving within. Indeed, against the solid and impermeable square that monumentalizes governmental reason, there’s another sense of the public plaza as a space for disruption and movement.² And here I agree with Joel Stillerman who challenges the idea that public space is in general decline in Latin America (294); rather, he claims, it takes different forms and survives in different places. Let me expand upon this in a slightly different direction. Here, in the plaza, I am looking for the points where hyper-rationality meets contrarian disorder, where uncommon minority voices try to make themselves heard.³ Perhaps I want to be in the presence of the multitude of Hardt and Negri, which is composed of a set of singularities that cannot be reduced to sameness. Here we can see a spatial acting-out, what De Certeau refers to as the act of creation, overriding the logic of fixed and irreducible form (1984 129). We may be looking, as Mignolo did, for *enactment* over representation (332). These interventions—if we can find them—can also be read as pulsations, transversal movements, vectors that open to multiple spaces and a reading of the in-between. Henri Lefebvre once suggested that they yield new social relations as well as new points of understanding (1991, 286); but there’s something else.

I want to signal the *trivial* as the beginning of major encounters. We will remember, while we’re at it, that the medieval *trivium* in university studies referred to the lower division of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, and logic (against the higher arts of the quadrivium—

² An idea belonging to Fernando Guillén Martínez, cited in Low , 31.

³ Bakhtin reminds us that heteroglossia, when worked out from below—from the popular sectors—, finds its best site of elaboration in the public plaza. When translated to the novel, the rogue figure dominates, refusing to understand society’s main language. Incomprehension is the main feature of this heteroglossic text (401). This offers a particular enticement for looking at the plaza itself.

mathematics, science, and music). The trivium also stands for a “crossroads,” a place where paths intersect and then diverge. The material of this passing through, because it is not fixed and grounded, thus becomes considered trivial, without further import. Just as grammar and rhetoric pass as artifice, not fixed in the seriousness of science, the trivial also passes as commonplace stuff, surface detail over depth. I want to claim the trivial (from its medieval sense) as the challenge and eventual undoing of public order. Not the major public protests, not the orchestrated performance, not the monumental staging of bodies imposed on the landscape of the quadrant, but the subtle movements and muffled sounds that cross through the square, the lingering conversations in a lesser tone, producing ongoing exchange. Emerging from this is a way to think about alternative forms of voice and art: rumor, gossip, songs or jokes, non-dominant differences placed side by side that refuse a coherent whole; the place where laughter erupts to remind us of all that is human.⁴ The goal here is dialogue and recognition, a way to speak to one’s neighbor in muted tones and still be heard.⁵ It may also evoke the artfulness of style that is produced outside the canon.

María Lugones brings us to an interesting point when she asks if multicultural social groups reach self-realization through a process of public recognition or through a more submerged interaction that hardly comes into view (2000, 178). She stresses anonymity as a strategy, along with the importance of disguise, a way to enunciate low profile forms of resistance. Like James Scott from whom Lugones borrows some of these concepts, she seeks an infra-political zone, even forms of resistance “that dare not speak their own name” (Lugones 178). From here, we might speculate that the infra-political be found in Anzaldúa’s border zones, Deleuze’s concept of flows, or Manuel Castells’ insistence on the arbitrariness of boundaries. This is the site for the eruption of carnival,

⁴ On this, see Bakhtin, who describes the plaza as a chronotope, a place where the non-public sphere of life turns public, a place that reestablishes the public nature of the human (161).

⁵ Diana Taylor raises the question of the “ephemerality” of this performance, whether it can be saved at all or has the staying power to transmit vital knowledge (2003, 5).

crossed identities, and mobility of forms where the disguise and mask are reigning forms of intervention. This plaza sets this in motion.

The plaza produces two contradictory formulae: one reworks a guiding phrase that once belonged to the Cuban revolution, “Within the plaza, everything; beyond the plaza, nothing.” The plaza as a site of containment, where the libidinal forces of a population are allowed to erupt and explode. The proviso, of course, is that any rebellion must be staged within the plaza’s borders; even subversive action is bound to fixed space and time. After an evening of fun, all diversions are canceled and order will be restored. An alternative model for the plaza imagines passions and voices that exceed the frame; a run-off of feelings in which excess and flow give rise to forms of rebellion, which, once initiated, spreads its tributaries far beyond the square.

Let us say that the scope of the plaza today is a trope for the neoliberal project. It is not simply that the plaza becomes a face-off for the state against the people, but that it works as a place for the blurring of boundaries, a confusion of in and out, which, in its apparent openness, characterizes neo-liberalism itself. The metaphor of the Moebius strip that keeps everything in ongoing movement as long as that movement favors markets and whatever sells. Meaning comes from the scenario (the term has been cultivated by Diana Taylor, 28-33) more than a fixed narrative and text. Yet on the stage of the plaza, there is always a chance for something new. Here, I am thinking of the inter-subjective moment that escapes the ear of the market and state. Lacan helps us with his neologism of *extimacy*, a way to merge the inside and outside, to find the stranger within us. A way to think of consciousness in terms of the crossings on the seam between self and other. The social sciences may handle the first part of this project well, but to register the rumblings of the unexpected, to cross inside and out, literature has something more to say and helps us think of political solutions from the perception of art. Let me begin with a consideration of two essays devoted to the plaza and follow with some literary examples that consider its lines of flight.

Néstor Perlongher and María Moreno, two major figures in the production of queer theory and literature in Argentina, help us to think this

through. In *La Prostitución Masculina* (1986), an essay that circulated widely among gay rights activists in the Southern Cone, Néstor Perlongher reads the Latin American plaza (in this case the public space of Sao Paolo) through the interpretive lens of Gilles Deleuze (in Latin America, many have found that Perlongher was perhaps Deleuze's most faithful reader). For Perlongher, the plaza is a *lugar de encuentro*, a pick-up site for minority subjects.

Rather than fix the categories and habits of the cruisers of Sao Paolo's plazas, Perlongher sees all minority behavior in transit, mobile and en route to becoming. Deleuze's concept of "devenir femme" is here of central importance. From the majority's perception, where masculinity occupies the dominant model, "woman" refers to anyone defined as subordinate or on the edge of power. But this abstract concept of "woman" allows for a certain freedom since it is always oppositional to masculine hegemony and never fixed in place; always in a state of emergence, it never takes final form. We are all feminine, both Deleuze and Perlongher would say, by contrast to masculine power.⁶ The plaza is the theatrical space that permits a performance of this womanhood in potential; it is oppositional, chameleonic, without fixed form or name. Rather than enforce a style of being, the scene of the plaza unleashes multiple subjectivities that displace any fixed sense of form. Here, movement is anything but fatal or irreversibly determined. Accordingly, classifications collapse; no social stigma can hold.

The plaza, then, is an autonomous space with its own ecology, but it also invites surprise. For Perlongher, this center becomes "the adventure of the 'perhaps,' of extravagance, of flights. Flows of populations, flows of desire" (27). And in this context, the "carnivalization" of identities becomes almost baroque, Perlongher tells us; its excess of forms leap beyond the constraints of law (71). By extension we might conclude that if there is a syntax of the plaza, the counter-current begs us to speak incorrectly and upset grammatical rule. The new field of meanings eludes our classification.

⁶ Anyone who traverses the neat order of the state is per force a nomadic figure, a contraband subject, approaching the position of 'woman.'

María Moreno supplies another dimension to this discussion. In her new book of crónicas, *Banco a la sombra* (2007), a travel log in the broadest sense of the term, she brings us to the scene of the *plaza pública*, its social and political significance through many countries and cities, and signals the friction of bodies that come into contact as they cross the plaza itself.

Like Perlongher, she offers the plaza as a site where identities are tested and she considers the names and public personae demanded of citizens by law. But as a *flâneur*, Moreno is seditious: she changes the names of people she meets, and removes the stability of national bearing. As a result, from reading her text, we often find it hard to determine the full spectrum of the real separated from fictive invention. Under Moreno's lens, naming carries no proof of origin, no guarantee of national identity or sexual choice. Rather, it is simply a place holder, which changes as individuals come into temporary contact with others. Performance or enactment determines who's who. Moreno is shocked when she is called a *gringa* tourist in Mexico City; here she is "simply white" ("blanca a secas," 39), a person of no exception. And as much as her desired identity fails to surface, the new one allows a disguise, a way to zig-zag through possibilities of inhabiting alien space.

Equally important for her are the modes of experience that produce their internal rhythms. Moreno is attentive to the rhythms of movement, the music that fills the air, but she also listens to the ways in which memory is formed by repetition. Even the specters of the past come in verse forms with caesuras, refrains and repetitions that structure the landscape we know. This is the experience that allows minority participants to *see* and *touch* the other. Rhythm, owing to its non-verbal form, keeps members of the community alert to the past and future, in contact with each other beyond the word itself.

It is strange the Perlongher as poet failed to notice this prominent feature while Moreno clearly picks up on the rhythm of bodies, the musical intonations of the town square in order to emphasize another way of putting experience on the line. By Moreno's terms, moreover, the rhythm that is felt in the square alerts us to the rhythm of individual memory as

well. It pegs experience to the beats of the spectral past, it lets the invisible be heard, offering another way to count that eludes the strict order of the computer and clock. “To count is the way to imagine an impossible possession,” she writes (150). Counting may be a way to take a stock, the census takers’ dream, but it is also a way to chart the rhythms of experience that lie outside of language itself. This is the point where the sensorium comes into play. And through it, as I wish to argue shortly, it brings another term for collective activity, a way to break the walls of tradition through the intervention of *style*.

Foucault, who is one among many scholars in the late twentieth century who took up questions of space, preferred to celebrate the heterotopias, the juxtaposition in a single real space of several spaces that are in themselves incompatible. The theater and cinema are his prime examples, but the plaza could work as well. Let’s take this one step further and claim that, more important than the multiple spaces, are the multiple experiences that the plaza effects on the bodies of transient subjects. These sensations, I would like to believe, create not just a pattern of flow, but form the basis of understanding among passersby who cross through the square.

In politics, this is an inter-subjective moment that is created from the fibers of non-harmonization, somehow woven together as part of a larger social fabric while retaining hold on individual uniqueness. The inter-subjective moment, moreover, blankets us from the centers of power; as a counter-public intention, it allows us to link universal and particular through the bond of ethics and aesthetics. It is achieved by an awakening of the senses, keeping the senses on alert. It is a moment when, in Aristotelian terms, the inner sense, that all of us have, is alerted to reach the other.⁷

Let me see how this works its way through several literary texts before getting on to a final speculation. Traditionally, literature has represented the plaza as a nostalgic longing for the past, as a place of romance and intrigue, a public space that endures over time. But postmodern authors have changed this form, evoking the public plaza, both

⁷ I am referring to Aristotle’s *De Anima*. See a propos the gifted and insightful analysis of Daniel Heller Roazen.

to put under scrutiny the crisis of state and to propose the plaza as a site for alternative congregation. With that, the plaza becomes a site for contestatory subjectivities, gatherings of marginal peoples and the possibilities of alternative actions. It is a plaza that needs to be heard.

In Chile since the Pinochet days, it is no surprise that the plaza comes into representation in so many literary texts. A symbol of the vigilant eye of the state, of public conversation foreclosed, the plaza is evoked to remember the diminished public sphere. Diamela Eltit, Carmen Berenguer, and Pedro Lemebel, to my mind among the most interesting avant-garde writers in Chile today, repeatedly take on the plaza in order to address this crisis of public participation; equally important, they find in the plaza a key to express the drama of ethics and aesthetics. They seek to find a voice.

Diamela Eltit turns time and again to different sites of congregation, from the public plaza, in her novel *Lumpérica*, to the market, in *Los trabajadores de la muerte*; even in her novel, *Mano de obra*, the supermarket becomes a featured space. In these texts, Diamela has always installed herself in the tension between power and powerlessness; she has brought into account the humiliation of citizens, first under dictatorship and then under neoliberal regimes. The prostitute, the homeless person, victims of rape or incest, mutilated victims of violence all come under her purview. In particular, *Lumpérica* (1983) reproduces social violence through the violence of literary form. A fragmented text, with injurious speech, *Lumpérica* is written like collage, with scraps of voices, preverbal sounds, truncated syntax and broken narrative spaces, and bits of poetry set against shards of prose. But the staging of this takes place in the public plaza, which in the case of Eltit's novel, is illuminated by a spotlight that seems to cast its authority upon the innocent passersby (the allusion here is to Santiago's Plaza Brasil). Administration of power to discipline noncompliant subjects: this was the definition of official space under Pinochet's rule. In the literary plaza invented by Eltit, the main actor, La Iluminada, appears as a vagabond, a homeless woman who sits all night in the square, trying to elude the spotlight and finding an alternative temporality of her own.

Ronald Christ compares the figure in the square to Da Vinci's *homo quadratus* (Eltit, 1997 205), a testimony to human form and rationality. But in fact Eltit challenges the neatness of this renaissance model. As such, Eltit not only pinpoints the woman's marginality and silence, but she also reveals, around this figure, an emerging humanistic pact of another kind. The rhythm and representation of the crowd taken from a page of *Lumpérica* gives a sense of the flow of this text:

Los pálidos se han tomado las esquinas de la plaza y acurrucan allí sus cuerpos protegidos unos contra otros, sus cuerpos frotados que, en el bautizo, intercambian apodos en sus poros famélicos. Ellos se tocan y manoseados ceden.

Nombres sobre nombres con las piernas enlazadas se aproximan en traducciones, en fragmentos de palabras, en mezclas de vocablos, en sonidos, en títulos de films. Las palabras se escriben sobre los cuerpos. Convulsiones con las uñas sobre la piel: el deseo abre surcos.

...

Con sonidos guturales llenan el espacio en una alfabetización virgen que altera las normas de la experiencia. Y así de vencidos en vencedores se convierten, resaltantes en sus tonos morenos, adquiriendo en sus carnes una verdadera dimensión de belleza.

...

En desgarrador sonido se convierten. (1983, 11-13)

[The pale people have taken possession of the square's corners and huddle their bodies there, shielded one against another, their rubbed against bodies that during the baptism exchanged aliases through their starving pores.

They touch each other and pawed over, they yield.

Names upon names with their legs intertwined, they draw close in translations, in fragments of words, in jumbles of letters, in sounds, in movie titles. Words are written on their bodies. Convulsions with fingernails across flesh: desire opens furrows.

....

With guttural sounds they fill the space in a virginal alphabetization that alters the norms of experience. And that's how from conquered into conquerors they are transformed, standing out in their swarthy tones, their flesh acquiring a truer dimension of beauty. Because even she could be compromised by the chance arrangement of bodies. The same ones being readied for a new cycle.

...

They turn into heartrending sound. (1997 17-19)

However we read *Lumpérica*, we encounter points of resistance against authoritarian rule, ways to reappropriate this public space and put it to

different function, to open it to the idea of “no place,” outside of consumerism and beyond the reach of the state. This inversion is staged by the entrance of marginal sectors—lovers, beggars, the elderly, the insane—who resist the linearity of the spotlight, and supply an action and voice of their own. Thus, against the solid beam cast by the spotlight, a trope emerges from below, in crosses and zig-zag connections; they sustain the hybridity of the book. These crossed lines yield new fictions of identity (cruci-fictions, in a later novel), and like the fused Joycean language that underlies Eltit’s writing, they forge different sounds and in the end, produce alternative name for lumpen subjects. In the process, these subjects refuse the hierarchy of law.

Perhaps this is the activation of another kind of story, one more dependent on the rhythms of orality and less on linear markers. Walter Benjamin, in this regard, compares the single focus of the novel on a single hero whereas the storyteller of oral tradition purports to tell “many diffuse occurrences” at once (98). In this regard, the popular figures who appear in Eltit’s fictions celebrate the original sense of the plaza as the polis, a source of inventiveness and exchange, a source for politics and art. Not a singular expression, but many diffuse tales at once, Eltit’s plaza is overrun by popular interventions.

If Eltit takes the plaza as a point of departure to represent the excluded voices whose stories are rarely heard, Pedro Lemebel manages this space in a different way, queering it, bending the lines that would signal clear demarcations of the plaza. From his first book of *crónicas*, published in Chile in 1994, queerness produces the possibilities of an alternative sensibility in the public space. Here, the plaza in the literary text brings in an esthetics of triviality as it occurs at the crossroads. The rule that sets the frame and eventually the rule of the law are all tested in Lemebel’s works. But unlike Diamela Eltit, who sought to subvert the eye of surveillance through muted sounds and the friction of bodies, Lemebel in the years after dictatorship understands that in order to queer the public space, he needs to rewrite the map. Along with the rhythm of language that lifts off the page, in the rhythm of cruising bodies, Lemebel issues a challenge to the cartographies of neoliberal regime.

From the *jardín popular* to the *cancha de fútbol*, Lemebel takes us through the sites of reunion that mark popular culture in Santiago; his teasing eye even falls on occasion upon urban elites. Yet the central plaza that separates rich and poor gains his repeated attention. Here, in the Plaza Italia, these different cultures scream out their conflicts of difference. Lemebel sees the Plaza Italia as a dividing zone in the city: above of Plaza Italia as the zone of elites; below Plaza Italia leads to zones of poverty and destitution. Plaza Italia opens to “the urban jungle,” staging conflicts of culture and voice. Here the plaza proposes a crisis in naming, constituted by the image of crossroads and multidirectional pressures placed on the whole. In his *crónica*, “La Plaza Italia (O eran cuatro esquinas que hablaban de dos)” [“Plaza Italia (or there were four corners that spoke about two”], Lemebel describes a border zone, a site that anchors the cardinal points on a map and divides the social classes:

La frontera limítrofe que partía en dos el queque social. A partir de estas cuatro esquinas formadas por el cruce de Vicuña Mackenna y Alameda, se hablaba de subir hacia Providencia o bajar al centro, como si la estatua ecuestre del general Baquedano plantada en el plató central de la plaza, hubiera sido el monigote guardián de la clase popular, que en oleaje violento de sus manifestaciones, lograba llegara hasta allí donde se situaba el borde invisible entre el este cordillerano de la burguesía y el oeste comunitario del centro cívico, el antiguo centro de Santiago, territorio democrático y plural ocupado desde siempre por un diverso caudal humano, vitrineando a codazos cierta tolerancia, alguna promiscuidad virtual, cierto amasijo de estatus, sexos y pellejos múltiples que recorrían las antiguas galerías y edificios añosos, asombrados de aquel sencillo esplendor metropolitano. (*El Zanjón de la Aguada*, 197-98)

[The border zone that divides the social cake in two. From these four corners crossing Avenue Vicuña Mackenna and the Alameda, people spoke of going up to Providencia or going downtown, as if the equestrian statue of General Bacquedano perched in the center of the plaza, would have been the guardian angel of the popular classes, who in a violent wave of protests, managed to cross the invisible line separating the bourgeois neighborhoods from the community, the ancient center of Santiago, a democratic and plural space occupied since forever by a mixed up flow of humanity, showing off certain attitudes of tolerance, as they rushed elbow to elbow, in virtual promiscuity, massaging status, sex, and pubic hairs, brushing through ancient galleries and crumbled buildings, surprised by simple metropolitan splendors. (*El zanjón de la Aguada* 197-98. My translation)]

Here the plaza is an empty signifier; it registers cross-overs and contrasts in the social sectors, but lacks substance in itself. It is a space for movement and in the literary sense, a space for the movement of language. But the plaza is also the place for counting time. In the above citation, the plaza reminds Lemebel of the plebiscite of 1988 (“La fiesta del NO”), when the masses broke class barriers of the city and invaded Santiago’s neighborhood above Plaza Italia in a show of solidarity that no longer can be reenacted under neoliberal regimes today. The plaza, then, as a scenario that makes visible what’s already there; a plaza which needs the work of the Darwinian archaeologist to uncover its layers of sediment and fill in the gaps of history.⁸ But the Plaza also keeps a mental clock of current time, recording the change of passersby who come through at different hours. It is evening time, seven o’clock, when Lemebel observes the queer population that takes over Plaza Italia and opens it to the traffic of cruising.

Plaza time is also marked by popular song and orality, which is marked to the drumbeat of rhythm, keeping the pace of encounters between social classes. No wonder that these *crónicas* are meant to be heard on radio, to capture the intonation and timbre on the air. This is another way of reaching for the body pulsations that intersect the public plaza, another way to make bodies count in the neoliberal regime. Against the *ciudad real* of Angel Rama’s lettered elites, Lemebel imposes a “*loca geografía*” upon public space such that disorder is loosened by eruptions of desire.⁹

It is no surprise that Lemebel’s writing has come under the rubric of “neobaroque,” a literature of excess, an explosion of semantic intensities flaring up over order. In this vein, if we accept that there is a syntax of the plaza, we also have to acknowledge the counter-current of rule, a point in space through which multiples vectors cross, a fugue of contrapuntal voices. This is where minority culture enters and makes its presence felt through its effect on the senses.

⁸ Again, see Diana Taylor (28) who reminds us that the scenario is as important as the message.

⁹ Lemebel makes a pun on the famous phrase coined by Subercaseaux, “Chile, loca geografía” and alludes to the queering of the Chilean landscape by the *loca* or homosexual presence in its most flamboyant forms.

One last example. Carmen Berenguer also records the complexities of the Plaza Italia and in fact enters into dialogue with Lemebel as if to compete for authority over what is for both writers a privileged site of meaning. She thus becomes the translator, the mediator of the senses felt in the public square.¹⁰ In *Mamá Marx* (2007), she opens her book of prose poems and poetry with a reflection on the plaza as a space where sensory data constitute memory and the imagination. Certainly, the Plaza is a place to mark social differences between those who cross through it.¹¹ But it is also plaza of scents, odors, sensations, and voices, a plaza filled with the inflamed rhetoric of preachers and the melody of popular song. The sensorium come alive here and cannot be repressed. In the “Anti-Cristo”, the inaugural poem of this volume, the *loca travesti* is the center of this meditation:

(Son las 7 de la tarde y aquí donde yo vivo de tiempo en tiempo
nuevo locos

Se allegan a la Plaza Italia, porque ésta no es una
Plaza habitual como las antiguas plazas provincianas y
coloniales

Donde el revuelo romántico crujía en la enagua casadera.
Aquí torpemente, es el cruce que reviente el corte en el tajo
de la ciudad.

....

Cuando dan las siete de la tarde, y la muchedumbre puebla
Pasajeramente, huidiza, este centro para vaciarlo,
Entremedio de los ciudadanos, de todo y de nada,
Sin merecerlo, una figura desfocada de loca obrera
Con los ojos perdidos en el máximo insondable,
Hace su aparición siniestra en la lírica mirada de estos fríos
Y húmedos inviernos del modernismo.
La loca trágica desnuda la miseria pasajera de la calle,
Cuando cruza por Baquedano –Allí va la Guipil de la Plaza

Italia—

Es una loca travesti fantasmal, que recuerda las uniones
obreras

De principios de siglo y que perfectamente podría ,
Sin proponérselo, convocar a los nuevos humillados de este
final.

¹⁰ Tatiana Calderon insists on Berenguer’s role as the translator of public space (5), but I want to take this in a different direction.

¹¹ Regarding La Plaza Italia, Berenguer writes, “It probably pointed to the limit mark of our fixations on the distance between the upper and lower classes. It also fixed the differences of our wounds.” (“Señalaría el límite de nuestras fijaciones en la distancia, entre los de arriba, y los de abajo. Fijaron la diferencia en nuestras heridas.” *Naciste Pintada* 24).

Nómade urbana, atraviesa sin miedo entre las gentes,
 Perpetuando el sarcasmo y ruin fracaso y húmedo, y
 siniestro
 Espectro de ciudad nueva.)¹²

[It's 7 o'clock and here where I live from time to time new madmen
 Come to the Plaza Italia, because this is not
 A normal plaza like those provincial plazas dating from colonial
 times
 When the romantic winds used to sweep up bridal skirts high in the
 sky.
 Here instead is the awkward cross that splits open the sutured
 wound of the city.

When it's 7 o'clock and the crowds
 ever so fleeting, ever so quick, fill this center in order to leave it
 abandoned,
 Among the citizens of all and nothing
 Undeserving, an unfocused figure of a drag queen worker
 With her eyes lost in deepest depths
 Makes her sinister appearance in the lyric gaze of these
 Cold and humid winters of modernity.
 The tragic queen unveils the passing misery of the street,
 When she crosses Baquedano's horse—there goes the mascot of
 Plaza Italia—
 She is a ghostly queen reminding us of workers in unions
 Of the century past who just as easily, without proposing it,
 Could bring together the new humbled masses of this finale.
 Urban nomad, she walks without fear among the people.
 Perpetrating sarcasm and vile and humid failure, a sinister
 Phantom of the new city. (My translation)]

Opposing pulsations fill the public space. But the *loca travesti* disrupts the traffic of the plaza; she cuts through the spatial and temporal orders of the square; she exceeds the crowd in symbolic value. Yet the “spectrality” of public protest is brought to mind through the drag queen-worker, reminding us of more glorious days and of all that labor has lost. In this way, the *travesti* forces another temporal sequence to emerge. Here, a ghostly presence dislocates time and space, putting pressure on a public memory that suffers from historical amnesia, putting pressure on Berenguer's work as a whole as she weaves between past and present, social

¹² This is the opening poem of *Mamá Marx*, but it also appeared in Berenguer's earlier volume, *Naciste Pintada*, 40. Hence, the repetition of time that appears in the poem is also a material repetition of the poem itself as it moves from one volume to another. Repetition as a way to move back through history.

participation and current stasis.¹³ And we feel it through the senses—the frigid streets and the clammy presence reach our memory as they also touch our bodies.

These Latin American writers together define the plaza as a zone where sensibilities cross. And from the sentient rhythms of experience, existing reason of state is put into question; the world of sensation issues a collective critique of the history we know. I advance here something that might register as strange to social scientists, by claiming that the aesthetic regime allows us to see a challenge to the state. It is not just that “space is permeated with social relations” (286) as Henri Lefebvre has taught us; rather, Eltit, Lemebel, and Berenguer lead us to the next step by claiming a construction of an alternative social space which is marked first through the sensory realm. This contact, then, through rhythm and movement leads to a community contact; in movement, beyond mimetic precision, it upsets the singularity of reason so often claimed by the state.

We are perhaps facing what Jacques Rancière famously referred to as the “distribution of the sensible,” and here I can only side with him when he describes “aesthetic acts as reconfigurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (9). Let’s say that official practice divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions, allocating public and social space, determining who’s in and who’s out, and also setting sensorial regimes that shape our subjectivities as both individuals and communities within the larger social whole. The state teaches us how to feel. This kind of social organization is the result of a “prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable”. (3). But then there are the alternative acts that reconfigure the distribution of sense experience and can lead to democratic exchange. If we think of the plaza as the effect of an official strategy regarding place, then

¹³ We may wish to consider spectrality as a mode of resurrecting those figures and memories that the state would hope to eliminate. Against this anti-democratic suppression, the ghosts emerge to put in question the absences or lacks of the actual moment. (Derrida has explored this more fully in *Specters of Marx*). We might also claim that the *loca*’s presence in the poem, the crowds are reminded of an earlier scene of defeat; a common memory of abjection is convoked, crossing the barriers of time and space. As in the case of Pedro Lemebel, Berenguer’s map of the plaza is traversed with a sense of failure, a mourning for the dead.

the multiple populations that cross through the square help us to apprehend another regime of sensory experience and the relation of the parts to the whole. Here, in what can only be seen as an anti-essentialist move, we come to surpass the singular and surrender to the movement within the square. Nothing is kept in its place. The poetic experience of the plaza holds firm.

In this reading of the sensible, I want to stress that it is equally important to bring back the aesthetic regime to make sense of political dilemmas. Rather than see the arts as autonomous and separate from other ways of doing and making in the social sphere, the aesthetic permits us to experience the sensible in a raw state before it is articulated by a social body. It brings to the surface the latent rhythms of democratic emancipation insofar as art redistributes experience on a coordinate of the single page. This is more than an aesthetics of mourning, which has greatly preoccupied recent critics who have studied the rise of neoliberal regimes (I have in mind Idelber Avelar, Alberto Moreiras, and Nelly Richard), but an aesthetics that opens the closed spaces that have sutured shut by the state. Here I have taken the plaza, but I just as well could have taken the wall—the *muro* that separates Mexico from the United States, Palestine from Israel, or the electric fence that separates post apartheid South Africa from Zimbabwe. These constructed spaces, oddly enough, purport to announce sovereign state power, but in fact they declare its decline. The walls and plazas consecrate their own corruption and, much in spite of themselves, they declare their ungovernability by the state. From so much traffic back and forth in the marshy zone between regimes, we are also dealing with a contest of understanding through the senses, in which the distribution of rhythms, voices, and movement alters what we know.

Let me rely on Georg Simmel for one last thought on this matter. Trying to explain what people will do to protect themselves from the excessive stimulations of metropolitan life, Simmel explained how we retreat to the intellect in order to calm our nerves. Perhaps the analogy needs to be turned around today. What if the rationalization of state is in fact resisted by unexpected stimuli and excess sensorial desire? This is the flip side of the civilized city, it is barbarism on the rise, the place where the

festivities burst upon the public space and willfully bend to disorder. It is the thrall that resists interpretation, the refusal of silence and order. It opens to a multiplicity of voices when they tell us there should be none. It is the resistance that comes from unleashed desire and disturbs the hierarchies of the frame. It is, in the final analysis, the interruption of the regimes of state by the imposition of vernacular style.¹⁴

I opened this essay with reference to Spencer Tunick's photos of naked bodies occupying the public square; I want to conclude with the zócalo again in the early months of 2008. Here's what you could have seen—a place of snow and ashes (“nieve y cenizas”), the square frozen over to allow Mexicans to skate on ice though not under a winter sun; a mobile museum (the *Museo nómada*) constructed of bamboo stalks and temporarily housing Gregory Colbert's colossal photo exhibit of animal life in Africa and Asia while some Mexicans, outdoors on the plaza, painted themselves in black and white stripes and others in black dots on yellow in order to look like zebras and jaguars. They were part of a protest of animal abuse in the Mexican jungles. “Give voice to those who have none” (“Dale voz a los que ya no tienen”), they cried while holding up a poster that read, “Who is really encaged?” (“¿Quién está enjaulado?”)

¹⁴ Barthes's brilliant reading of Sade informs my thinking. Of Sade, he writes: “the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or collisions): antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models. As the usual theory has it: the language is redistributed. No such redistribution is always achieved by cutting. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, lit, culture, and *another edge*, labile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. The two edges, *the compromises they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic: it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. The pleasure of the text is like that untenable, impossible, purely novelistic instant so revisited by Sade's libertine when he imagines to be hanged and then to cut the rope at the very movement of his orgasm, his bliss (6-7). Following from his logic, I imagine the plaza as a site for the production of style, of literature, of bliss, of political contestation, owing to the multiples collisions of forms and voice. A place where politics and style merge, the place of the minority voice. The place where a new orator is born, the place where minorities finds their poem. These contradictory forces have the capabilities of blasting open, if only for a moment, the dominant capitalist culture, based on commodity fetishism, consumer gratification and order.