

# Photo-ethnography and Political Engagement: Studying performative subversions of public space

## Foto-etnografía y compromiso político: Estudio de las subversiones performativas del espacio público

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Reflection paper

### Abstract

As a result of the development of digital technologies, the production, editing and publication of photographs is fully incorporated into our daily lives. We routinely use images as language to describe, comment on, interpret, laugh with, captivate, or ironize others. However, scant attention has been paid to how these technologies have been incorporated into research methods. The word continues to be the hegemonic source of the codes and categories used to analyze and engage in discussions in the academic community. During our research on performative practices at the Santiago Gay Pride Parade, we discovered a visual phenomenon that is impossible to describe using words alone. This led us to engage methodologically to approach our field of study using design, digital media and photographs. We believe that an eminently visual phenomenon such as the performative appropriation of public spaces must be studied using a method that preserves the richness of the spectacle and allows for narrative consistency.

**Keywords:** Performative protests, visual research, public space, gay pride parade, political visibility

### Resumen

Como resultado del desarrollo de tecnologías digitales, la producción, edición y publicación de fotografías está plenamente incorporada a nuestra vida diaria. Cotidianamente, usamos las imágenes como lenguaje para describir, comentar, interpretar, reír, cautivar o ridiculizar a otros. Sin embargo, se ha prestado poca atención a la forma en que estas tecnologías se han incorporado a los métodos de investigación. La palabra sigue siendo la fuente hegemónica de los códigos y de las categorías usadas para analizar y debatir en la comunidad académica. Durante nuestra investigación sobre prácticas performativas descubrimos en el Desfile del Orgullo Gay de Santiago un fenómeno visual que es imposible de describir sólo con palabras. Esto nos llevó a abordar metodológicamente nuestro campo de estudio utilizando el diseño, los medios digitales y fotografías. Creemos que un fenómeno eminentemente visual, como la apropiación performativa de los espacios públicos, debe ser estudiado con un método que preserve la riqueza del espectáculo y que permita la coherencia narrativa.

**Palabras clave:** Protestas performativas, investigación visual, espacio público, desfile del orgullo gay, visibilidad política.

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**Introduction**

In 2018, a social movement known as Feminist May burst onto the scene in Chile. It first developed in university communities in response to a number of unresolved sexual harassment complaints filed by students against professors. The movement then expanded beyond the original trigger of the protests to include calls for the elimination of sexist practices from the labor market, education, and public spaces; it then became a general call to end the patriarchy and its diverse incarnations (Grau 2018; Richard 2018). The protesters' bodies played a key role in their visibilization strategies. As Butler (2015) notes, when street protesters place their "bodies on the line," they performatively exercise the right to temporarily reconfigure the public space, its

uses, and, in general, their political relationships with hegemonic powers. Authors such as Borja (2003), Voirol (2005), and Tassin (2013) point out that citizenship is only effective when the subject constitutes itself as a citizen through public political actions.

The "agencing" (Ingold 2017, 20) of public space is recognized as an act exercised by a citizen who belongs to a specific group with a political presence (Cruces 1998). However, as Butler (2015) points out, the protesters' political power depends on the dissemination of their message through the media. As a result, images and digital networks are key resources for contemporary social movements (Castells 2012; Hermansen and Chilet 2010). As Butler puts it, "The street scenes become politically potent only when and if we



Figure 1: The main column of the Gay Pride Parade (2014) several blocks from La Moneda Presidential Palace in the heart of the civic center of Santiago de Chile. Source: By authors.



Figures 2 and 3: A protestor at the Santiago Gay Pride Parade (October 2014) uses the La Moneda Presidential Palace as a backdrop and poses for other protestors' cameras. Source: By authors.

have a visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live or proximate time, so that the media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action." (2015, 91)

At the same time, because of its strategic importance in making subaltern subjects politically visible, many of the practices deployed by protesters are developed in terms of their visual coverage and dissemination. "What bodies are doing on the street when they are demonstrating is linked fundamentally to what communication devices and technologies are doing when they 'report' on what is happening in the street." (Butler 2015, 93-94) Therefore, the visual aspect of the phenomenon becomes central. Long before the Feminist May movement of 2018, the 2006 and 2011 student protests and social movements linked to feminism, ethnic identities, and sexual minorities (Figure 1) appropriated and re-signified the public space in Chile through the performative unfolding of protestors' bodies. (Paredes, Ortiz, and Araya 2018; Urzúa Martínez 2015)

Protesters demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated level of awareness of this visual dimension, which they use strategically to compensate for the silence of the mainstream media when it comes to counterhegemonic demonstrations (Taylor 2016). As the images from the 2014 Santiago Gay Pride Parade presented in Figures 2 and 3 indicate, it is increasingly common for protesters and members of the public to generate and disseminate their own images. Our photo-ethnographic work on protests allows us to iden-

tify certain recurring practices related to the ways in which protestors change or leverage their appearance. As one protestor pointed out, they believe that their "body is the canvas" for slogans and political statements. In this paper, we will analyze some political uses of the body in public spaces during the Santiago Gay Pride Parade.

### The general context of the Santiago Gay Pride Parade

The end of the dictatorship in Chile allowed various marginalized groups to fight for visibility and their rights. In this context, LGBTI groups such as Movilh, ACCIÓN GAY, and Fundación Iguales organized and sought recognition from the rest of society, calling attention to conservative political and religious powers' prejudices, and worked to change legislation. This movement's achievements include the decriminalization of sodomy, the inclusion of principles of non-discrimination and respect for diversity in the education program through the General Education Law, the Anti-Discrimination Law that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as a protected category, and the Civil Union Law, which was passed in 2015 after 11 years in Congress.

In Chile, Gay Pride was originally celebrated at the end of September to commemorate the murder of scores of people in a fire in the gay nightclub Divine in early 1990s. However, for the past five years, Santiago's Gay Pride Parade has been held on June 28, which is when other cities hold their celebrations. The march starts in Plaza

Italia, where most political demonstrations begin, and ends in front of the La Moneda Presidential Palace. Although other protests also include music, theater, and dance, Gay Pride is organized as a carnival that publicly focuses the visibility of excluded bodies. Its intention is to transgress bourgeois normality, defy patriarchal powers, revalorize marginalized bodies, and encourage participants to be proud of who they are.

The overall dynamic is as follows: protestors gather in Plaza Italia and then march down the Alameda, Santiago's main avenue, until they reach the front of La Moneda Presidential Palace. Participants use traditional devices such as posters, banners, flags, slogans and songs as well as innovative performances and artistic actions to make their points. It is the latter aspect of the event that distinguishes it from other political activities. The protestors' bodies are used as canvases that bear slogans, symbols, and images.

### A brief history of the role of photography in social research

During the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the deictic behavior of the photographic image was placed at the center of reflections on photography by intellectuals such as Barthes (1981), Berger and Mohr (2009), and Sontag (2001).<sup>1</sup> They question the objectivity of photographic indexicality, viewing it as essentially subjective: its reading depends on the observer, from where they observe, and the memories it triggers. For Roland Barthes (1981), there is an insurmountable space between the photographed phenomenon and the subject who observes the image. For Barthes (1981), the moment at which a part of the photograph punctures the memory of its observer, making the indexical link between the photograph and what was once photographed disappear, is called *punctum*. John Berger states that this experience is the moment when "their ambiguity at last becomes true." (Berger and Mohr 2009, 288)

The correlate of this idea in the social sciences is the use of photographs to elicit meaning from research subjects (Clark-Ibañez 2004; Collier 1957;

Collier and Collier 1986; Harper 2002). Taking this one step further, photo-elicitation has been used to amplify the voices of research subjects in order to place them on the same level as the researcher (Parker 2009; Schrat, Warren, and Höpfl 2012; Warren 2002) The elicitation of photographs produced by the subjects themselves represents a dialogical encounter that exorcises the ghosts of colonialist photo-ethnography. As Pink (2008) points out, ethnography is characterized by paying special attention to the material and visual culture of the contexts it investigates, which assumes that visual data, like any other data, is not an objective representation of reality but rather a situated gaze that allows the viewer to develop relevant knowledge about the practices and meanings of a particular social field.

Following Haraway (1988, 1995), all scientific research involves a positioning of the researcher. As a producer of situated knowledge, the researcher must assume a dialogic articulation and correspondence (Ingold 2017) with the positioning of the investigated subjects. As Holm (2014, 383) points out, taking a photograph always implies intentionality, and it follows that there is necessarily an ethical/political position. Beyond the recognition of the diversity of subjects and their particular performative intentions, our political engagement with their demands and claims allows us, as researchers, using the pronoun "we" to narrate the situation.. But nevertheless, Jay Ruby (1991) alerts us to an important paradox: even if photo-ethnographers use a form of research that critically analyzes the positioning of researchers and subjects, they often impose their subjectivity on the interpretation of the data by means of technical and analytical devices. One way to mitigate this is through critical and self-reflective analysis of the research experience, which seeks to focus on and make sense of the political-aesthetical dimensions of the record of the subjects' actions.

Although the use of photographs for social research is almost as old as the photograph itself, and Franz Boas—one of the pioneers of modern anthropology—naturalized the production of

1 The work of those who rethink photography was strongly influenced by Walter Benjamin's reflections in his 1931 book *On Photography*. See Benjamin, Walter. 2015. *On Photography* (Translated and Edited by E. Leslie. London: Reaktion Books

photographs in fieldwork, photography still plays a secondary role in most research corpuses. Words continue to be the main source used in any report or study. Although images are used extensively to create knowledge on social life, in practical terms the institutions that fund research do not count a photo as a thousand words. In a nutshell, while words have "use value" as well as "exchange value" within the academia, social scientists only recognize the "use value" of photographic data. (Hermansen 2013). As such, our study has three complementary aims: to conduct original research on performative protests, to amplify the political claims of the protestors, and to contribute to the discussion of photo-ethnography.

### Photo-ethnographic analysis

Our photo-ethnographic method of analysis is qualitative. We hold an elicitation session to select the photographs that are to be analyzed. During this session, the field research experience is recovered and narrated using the photographic corpus. Throughout the photo elicitation we—as researchers and protestors—are able to recognize key moments relating to our participation in the event and can produce codes and categories to analyze the protest as a whole. Finally, we select images based on analytical categories that allow us to deepen the analysis on an empirical basis. As Figures 4, 5, and 6 show, we identify, highlight, and carefully describe key sections of each photo (Atkinson and Delamont 2008) to obtain original knowledge, which modifies the analytical category used to select the image. As a result, the photograph goes beyond being a mere illustration of a text (Harper 2008; Holm 2014) and becomes an irreplaceable source of knowledge.

#### *Unusual bodies defy the Public*

Figure 4 shows four young women standing in front La Moneda with painted torsos and covered faces. They are holding up a banner that bears the slogan "sexual revolution for those whose bodies have been a battleground." There are several symbolic references in this image. All of the subjects are hooded, which is a symbol of political radicalism. One of them is wearing a ski mask, which evokes the Zapatistas in Mexico or the armed groups that resisted the dictatorship in Chile. Another is wearing a kufiyya or Arab scarf,

which often represents the struggles of the Palestinian people. The other two partially cover their faces with t-shirts, which is often spontaneously done by protestors to keep the police from using video recording techniques to identify them. This symbolic hybridization, which refers to different social and political struggles, is part of a feminist framework that is referenced by the use of the slogan "sexual revolution for those whose bodies have been a battlefield." Based on this logic of symbolic and political hybridization, we can identify the Mapuche Meli Witran Mapu symbol and the symbolism of women who have applied paint to their bodies. Indigenous symbolism is frequently used in political protests because various social movements and organizations support the struggles of the Mapuche people, including members of the feminist movement.

As we observed in previous works (Fernández and Hermansen 2009, Hermansen and Fernández 2016), the demonstrators' attitude and position standing on the open grass, bare-chested with their faces covered stands in contrast to the neoclassical orthogonality and symmetry of the government building façade and the symmetrical formation of police officers on the esplanade grid, the concrete cylinders joined by chains, and the white fence that prevents pedestrians from circulating freely in the area. The four women and their banner stand out as a whole, imposing themselves on the landscape of power through a visual game of heterogeneously constituted cohesion.

Figure 4 shows a hybrid approach to defying the hegemonic public space and problematizing the idea that political protests point to the recognition of a single ideology. This eclectic performativity challenges conventional strategies of visibilization while seeking to transgress and ephemerally transform the symbolic landscape of the city rather than enrich it. The protestors' bodies are the narrative culmination of the Gay Pride Parade in front of the government palace: the emblem of protestors' antagonists. Thus, the backdrop stands in contrast to and amplifies their final visibility. As a result of this move by diverse anti-hegemonic groups, La Moneda triggers a "chain of equivalences" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2006), which relate and articulate a wide range of political subjectivities in opposition to the hegemonic powers.



Figure 4. "Sexual revolution for those whose bodies have been a battleground." Source: By authors.

In many protests, semi-nude bodies are adorned to make the public tense: breaking up the—politically constructed—normal Republican landscape. This strategy includes posing in front of the city's monuments and emblematic buildings so that their image can be captured and disseminated. From a photo-ethnographic recording and analysis perspective, posing with La Moneda as the backdrop represents a symbolic transgression of the political and republican normality. These images are in stark contrast to selfies or tourist photographs taken in those same places. The portraits of protestors' bodies depict excluded subjects who reappropriate these spaces in a double temporality: during their performance and when the photos are published.

Just before the beginning of the Gay Pride parade, a subject posed in front of the statue of General Baquedano near Plaza Italia (Figure 5). This 19<sup>th</sup> century military figure played several key roles including his leadership in two wars against Peru and Bolivia and the occupation of Mapuche territory. The performer poses semi-nude with a banner inscribed with the slogan "Free your mind, free yourself" in front of this historical figure. We will now highlight the performative antagonism between the subject and the statue.

The carefully adorned, white powdered body of the protestor has an inorganic feel, as if he were supposed to serve as a sort of human statue. However, he is re-humanized by his high-heeled shoes and

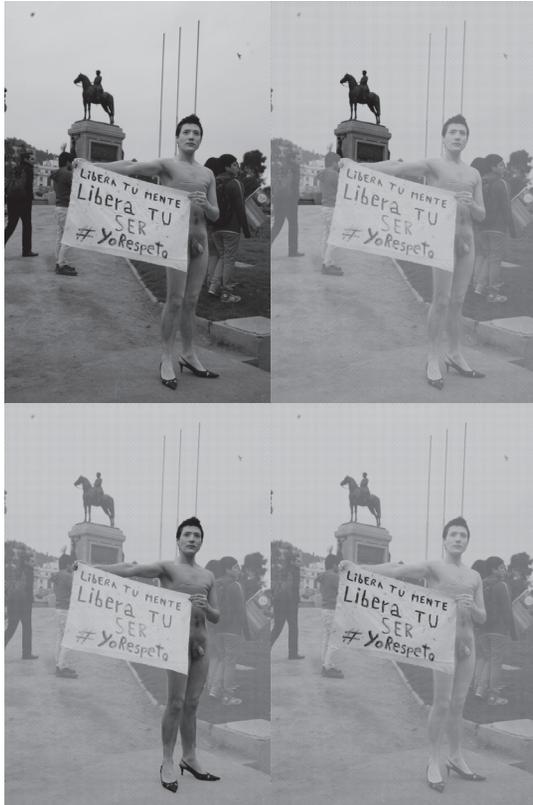


Figure 5. "Free your mind, free yourself." Source: By authors.

the banner that covers his chest: a nod to the legal-social pressure to which women are subjected.

Half-naked, powdered white, holding a banner but refusing to follow Baquedano's gaze, he performatively defines the general as his counterpart. His performance, which evokes the tension between self-objectification as a statue and re-subjectification as a woman, clashes with the static institutionalism that provides the context for his action. The performer's position visually connects his banner to both the statue and his own self-representation as a statue; this gives him a double presence in the public realm—the performance and the published images—which invite the spectator to challenge the militarization of the Republic represented by Baquedano through the imperative "Free your mind, free yourself." As Mitchell points out, "coming from a different direction (though certainly interwoven with trends that have been outlined), the increased presence of women, gays, and minorities in public space (...) raised in new ways questions of who public space is *for* and what violence in public space was meant to *contain*. Women's, gays', and minorities' insistence on being *present* and *visible* in public space forced dominant society to confront its exclusions." (2016, 8)

## Conclusions

By definition, commemorative events operate on a temporal horizon that brings the past into the present, evoking important moments for protestors (Delgado 2007; Fernández 2013, 2017). However, temporality also creates dialogues and symbolic tensions between performances and the historical places in which they are inscribed. As we saw in this analysis, buildings and statues serve as the backdrops for visual and symbolic interrogations of republican values that exclude gender, sexual, and ethnic diversities. Symbols of Mapuche culture and the Palestinian people, female bodies with bare torsos, and bodies adorned to evoke subjects that have been historically excluded—including a nursery school teacher and a policewoman—or that have high historical significance such as Salvador Allende (Figure 6) refer to the past but are evoked in the present to imagine a different future that is constituted by divergent modes of political relationships. For Butler, this "event is emphatically local." (2012, 138) However, the bodies examined here transcend the place and time of their protest because of the photographic records of the event. This interplay occurs on several levels. First, given the scant media coverage of this type of event, most of the records are produced by other protestors: by subjects committed to the same claims. As such, the images are recorded in "correspondence" (Ingold 2017) with those who are performing. These performances tend to be developed by subjects who are fully aware that the record is being made. Their modes of presentation, the structure of their messages and the rhythm with which they operate favor being photographed. Finally, with the publication and circulation of the images, the protestors themselves are corroborated as being part of the protest. Once installed in the public domain, these photographs acquire a new type of power given that "if those bodies on the line are not registered elsewhere, there is no global response, and also, no global form of ethical recognition and connection, and so something of the reality of the event is lost." (Butler 2012, 138) Conversely, "the receptivity (of the unexpected contained in the images) is a constituent feature of (ethical and political) action." (Butler 2012, 136)

The protestors go beyond the immediacy of being at the event through the photographic record and



Figure 6. "Free sex education." Source: By authors.

its circulation. These records provide an account of what happened, and in a certain sense they make it permanent on two levels. Once published, the images are available to be seen and shared, to be, as Berger and Mohr put it, "restored to a living context: not of course to the original temporal context from which they were taken—that is impossible—but to a context of experience. (...) It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable" (2009, 288). In addition to pointing to the protest and verifying its authenticity, these images introduce the certainty that what happened is also a possible future. In demonstrating that the hegemonic order was effectively subverted in the city, the photographs of bodies that appropriate the public space broaden the spectrum of the politically feasible. Ways of life that are habitually excluded dominate the urban landscape for a moment in the public space and forever in the photographs. In other words, what is normally "exceeded" (de la Cadena 2015) is described as real in the photographs and, therefore, as a real possibility of reorganizing our social relationships. In the words of Dominique Lestel, "We must alter profoundly what it means to engage in politics. The time of reforms has failed, and we need to

become more radical. Doing so requires a break in our usual ways of thinking. To conceptualize the forms that policy can take in the future, we need to mobilize an excessive kind of thinking—we need to adopt a posture that is a priori extravagant and put its plausibility to the test." (2016, 96)

In this sense, the struggles for visibility and the records that are created of those struggles exceed the specific moments in which they are deployed. By participating in the construction of urban and political imaginaries, these images cease to represent exceptional situations of the past. Instead, they foreshadow a potential new society that is not utopian, but tangible and within reach.

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