

The Art of Living Together

The Work of Caiozzama, Delight Lab, and LASTESIS during Chile's 2019-2020 Protests

Jennifer Ashley
George Mason University

Abstract: On 18 October 2019, a protest over an increase in metro fares in Santiago, Chile transformed into a nationwide uprising against inequality. As the protests evolved, it became clear that the discontent stemmed not only from the economic effects of the neoliberal model put into place during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973 to 1990), but also from the modes of relationality that it had engendered. The messages that protesters scrawled on the walls of the city insisted on the need for more empathy, respect, and dignity. Chilean artists responded by creating works that framed these individual grievances as collective experiences of a crisis in what in Spanish is called *convivencia*, or the art of living together. In this piece, I review the paste-up graffiti of Caiozzama, the visual mappings of Delight Lab, and the feminist performances of LASTESIS to highlight how these artists supported protesters' call for dignity and a new mode of *convivencia*.

Keywords: dignity; conviviality; *convivencia*; art; protest; Chile

Résumé : Le 18 octobre 2019, une protestation contre l'augmentation des tarifs du métro à Santiago du Chili s'est transformée en un soulèvement national contre les inégalités. Au fur et à mesure de l'évolution des manifestations, il est apparu que le mécontentement provenait non seulement des effets économiques du modèle néo-libéral mis en place pendant la dictature de Pinochet (1973-1990), mais aussi des modes de relationnalité qui en résultent. Les messages griffonnés sur les murs de la ville par les manifestants insistent sur la nécessité de faire preuve de plus d'empathie, de respect et de dignité. Les artistes chiliens ont répondu en créant des œuvres qui présentaient ces griefs individuels comme les expériences collectives d'une crise de ce que l'on appelle, en espagnol, la *convivencia*, ou l'art de vivre ensemble. Dans cet article,

je passe en revue les graffitis en pâte à modeler de Caiozzama, les cartographies visuelles de Delight Lab et les performances féministes de LASTESIS pour souligner la manière dont ces artistes ont soutenu l'appel des manifestants à la dignité et à un nouveau mode de *convivencia*.

Mots-clés : dignité ; convivialité ; *convivencia* ; art ; protestation ; Chili

On 18 October 2019, a protest over an increase in metro fares in Santiago, Chile transformed into a nationwide uprising against inequality. As the protests evolved, it became clear that the discontent stemmed not only from the economic effects of the neoliberal model put into place during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973 to 1990) but also from the modes of relationality that it had engendered. The messages that protesters scrawled on the walls of the city insisted on the need for more empathy, respect, and dignity. Chilean artists responded by creating works that framed these individual grievances as collective experiences of a crisis in what in Spanish is called *convivencia*. As pointed out by Wise and Noble (2016, 425), *convivencia*, more so than the English term conviviality, signals the friction of navigating shared spaces. In this piece, I review the paste-up graffiti of Caiozzama, the visual mappings of Delight Lab, and the feminist performances of LASTESIS to highlight how these artists, in different forms and registers, supported protesters' call for dignity and a new mode of *convivencia*.

The murals of Caiozzama have become some of the most iconic images of the Chilean protests. When I met up with him in February of 2021, I asked if he had seen the protests coming. "No," he responded. "I thought we were the perfect sheep of neoliberalism." He continued, "People would tell me, 'Your country is so great,' and I would say, 'No, my country is shit.' I don't think I'd ever seen the Chilean people. I never felt a part of Chile. And then the eighteenth happened, and I saw Chile. I saw the people. And I felt so proud of everything that was happening."

Claudio Caiozzi, known as Caiozzama, returned to Chile and to his job as a photographer for the newspaper *El Mercurio* in 2014 after four years of living abroad. "The only thing that I found to be different when I returned was that everything was much more expensive," he told me. "London expensive." While in Paris, Caiozzama had learned the technique of paste-up, an art form that had developed in response to anti-graffiti laws that had focused on painting

walls rather than pasting on walls. Caiozzama made use of the newspaper's professional printer during his late-night shifts and began to print his photos and paste them on walls around Santiago using a collage technique that combined images from advertisements. The sharp social commentary of his work, often incorporating humour and irony, helped him gain an international following on Instagram and the interest of a Chilean art gallery.

When the 2019 protests started, Caiozzama found himself in what became known as Ground Zero. His apartment was just steps away from where the confrontations with police were occurring and which later would be renamed *Plaza Dignidad* (Dignity Plaza) by protesters. "I grabbed my camera," he told me, "I went down to the protests and I haven't stopped taking photos since." That October, Caiozzama got to know his neighbours for the first time. He became familiar with the youth who formed part of the so-called "front line" of protesters, and was a witness to the police violence against them. When windows were boarded up, he seized on these new walls to express what he saw happening around him.

Following reports by human rights organizations that the Chilean police had caused ocular trauma in more than 300 people through their use of so-called rubber bullets, Caiozzama created a mural with a paste-up of Bloch's "The Resurrection of Christ" (1881) at the center, flanked by photographs of armed police. In the mural,¹ Christ has a bloody patch over one eye and is holding a sign that reads, "Do not forgive them, for they know perfectly well what they are doing." His critique of the state's relationship with its citizens continued on another wall in which Caiozzama reflected on the fact that many front-line protesters had grown up in orphanages run by SENAME, the National Service for Minors, which has been at the centre of recent scandals of systemic abuse. In this mural,² angels encircle the phrase, "The child who is not embraced by his tribe will, as an adult, burn down the village to feel its warmth."

In each of his murals, Caiozzama invites the public to reflect on issues central to the protests: a call for more empathy, respect, and dignity. His work suggested that the first step in renegotiating *convivencia* was acknowledging the existence of the other. As Caiozzama noted, "After the start of the protests, we began to look each other in the eyes again."

During the protests, the artist collective Delight Lab also played a key role in channelling the demands of the streets into clear, simple messages. On the night of 19 October, a day after the metro stations had been set on fire and then

President Sebastián Piñera had declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew, a light projection of the word *Dignidad* (Dignity) appeared on the side of a building in the plaza at the centre of the protests.

The authors of this intervention were siblings Andrea and Octavio Gana. They had formed their audiovisual and experimental art and design studio, Delight Lab, in 2009. In the years that followed, they had supported environmental causes, such as a movement that opposed the construction of a hydroelectric dam. In 2018, a year before the uprising, Andrea and Octavio—like many in the country—were moved to action following the assassination by police of Camilo Catrillanca, a 24-year-old Indigenous man. Delight Lab projected an image of the young Mapuche man onto the side of a building, along with the words “may his face fill the horizon,” a line from a poem written by Chilean poet Raúl Zurita in response to the murder.

When the protests began in 2019, Delight Lab was primed to respond. In each of the nights that followed the initial protests, they projected a word or phrase onto one of the buildings bordering *Plaza Dignidad*. Each projection was a response to the government or to what was happening that day. On 21 October, when then President Piñera made a statement that the country was “at war with a powerful, relentless enemy,” Delight Lab responded with: “We are not at war / We are united.” In most cases, however, Delight Lab opted for just one word. “We have realized that the fewer the words, the more powerful the message,” Octavio told me. In some cases, they debated for hours about the word to project, trying to be in tune with what they felt was happening around them.

Other words, like “hunger,”³ which they projected during the pandemic on 18 May 2020, came to them in an instant. They were responding to the decision of low-income residents to break quarantine restrictions and go into the streets to protest, arguing that the government’s shutdowns and slow response with economic stimulus packages were causing them to go hungry. In response to their projection, Delight Lab received death threats and their Instagram account was hacked. The following day when they decided to project “humanity,”⁴ hoping for a conciliatory tone, their projection was blocked by light coming from a van that was protected by Chilean police cars. Through these interventions and others, Delight Lab attempted to draw attention to the need for a renewed pact of *convivencia*.

For both Caiozzama and Delight Lab, however, it was the work of feminist collective LASTESIS that represented the pinnacle of art during the protests.

On 20 November 2019, a month into the protests, LASTESIS launched their performance piece, “A rapist in your path.” As Octavio Gana from Delight Lab told me, “Just when everyone was getting tired, this performance gave us the injection of feminist energy that we needed.”

LASTESIS was formed in 2018 by Paula Cometa, Daffne Valdés, Lea Cáceres, and Sibila Sotomayor. Their work draws on texts by Rita Segato and Silvia Federici, and aims at translating feminist theory to everyday experience. “A rapist in your path” focuses not only on sexual violence but on gendered structural violence more broadly. The performance invites women to participate in a choreography that is paired with chanted lyrics and an infectious beat. Both the choreography and the lyrics make specific references to police violence. At one point in the performance, for example, the women squat, mimicking the movement that many are asked to perform—sometimes naked—by police when they are detained. Five days after the first performance⁵ in the city of Valparaíso, LASTESIS repeated it in Santiago.⁶ Videos of those events⁷ were shared massively on social media, and women all over the country and all over the world repeated the performances.

When LASTESIS appeared at an event that I attended in December 2019 at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago for the “Day against Femicide,” the women present spontaneously began a performance, spilling into the street and interrupting traffic. There, in the centre of a crowd of women chanting and moving in unison, the power of the performance was palpable. At that same event, a woman asked for the microphone to address LASTESIS.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to articulate this, to look at each other’s faces, for giving this opportunity to women from low-income neighbourhoods. It’s not that we have less brains—[the crowd laughed and cheered]—but we have less time, less opportunity, and less possibilities to be able to create [...] When we did the performance in the park, there were women who were just passing by, but they ended up staying [...] and they cried because what you all are doing is putting on the table that in the whole world, and in our country, women are raped every day, in all of the social classes [...] I thank you for this poetry that you gave our rebellion [...] We united behind LASTESIS, and it’s hard for us to unite sometimes.

The performance of LASTESIS had brought to the fore the need for a gender-based analysis of the crisis of *convivencia*. When I asked Cometa, one

of the members of LASTESIS, how their performance was in dialogue with the broader protests, she replied, “One of the principal demands of the protests was dignity. A dignified life in terms of health, work, pensions, education, and every aspect of life...and these demands are, at the end of the day, feminist demands.”

This focus on dignity in the Chilean protests echoes Jackson’s (1998, 195) description of what he calls the “existential imperative” or the need for people “to have some say in the world into which they are thrown, that they must in some measure choose their own lives and feel that they have a right to be here, to be free to make a difference, to be loved and affirmed.” The demand for dignity was a call for new modes of relationality and a renegotiation of *convivencia*. The ethnographic ear of Caiozzama, Delight Lab, and LASTESIS, and their ability to reframe individual grievances as collective experiences contributed to strengthening the signal amidst the noise of the protests.

Jennifer Ashley

George Mason University,
jashley4@gmu.edu

Notes

- 1 Photo accessible on Instagram, uploaded by caiozzama, accessed on November 5, 2022.
- 2 Photo accessible on Instagram, uploaded by caiozzama, accessed on November 5, 2022.
- 3 Instagram photo accessible with user account, uploaded by delight_lab_oficial, accessed on November 5, 2022.
- 4 Instagram video accessible with user account. Video uploaded by delight_lab_oficial, accessed on October 5, 2022.
- 5 Instagram video accessible with user account. Video uploaded by lastesis, accessed on October 5, 2022.
- 6 Instagram video accessible with user account. Video uploaded by lastesis, accessed on October 5, 2022.
- 7 Link to Youtube video “A rapist in your path: Chilean protest song becomes feminist anthem” uploaded by Guardians News. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5AAscy7qbl>, accessed on October 5, 2022.

References

- Contreras, Emilio. 2018. ““¿Este es su nuevo país?”: El furioso poema de Raúl Zurita por la muerte de Camilo Catrillanca” [“This is Your New Country?: The Furious Poem of Raúl Zurita for the death of Camilo Catrillanca]. *BioBio Chile*, 15 November. <https://www.biobiochile.cl/noticias/artes-y-cultura/actualidad-cultural/2018/11/15/este-es-su-nuevo-pais-el-furioso-poema-de-raul-zurita-por-la-muerte-de-camilo-catrillanca.shtml> (accessed 21 April 2022).
- Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. 2020. “Chile: Events of 2019.” *World Report 2020*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/chile>.
- Wise, Amanda and Greg Noble. 2016. “Convivialities: An Orientation.” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37(5): 423–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2016.1213786>
- Jackson, Michael. 1998. *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.