Witness to the Ruins: Mapa Teatro

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The stage looks like a warehouse or workspace—the wide central area is open, the periphery cluttered with large metal screens, small mobile stands, chairs, drop cloths, and other sundry objects. Members of Mapa Teatro, one of Colombia’s major performance and theatre “laboratories” (rather than a collective or “grupo” so characteristic of Latin American theatre), look more like technicians than actors as they mill about in dark work clothes moving projectors and screens that show the demolition of a blighted neighborhood (El Cartucho) in Bogotá during their performance, Testigo de las ruinas (Witness to the Ruins). Off to the side or downstage center (depending on the performance space) a heavy, dark skinned woman sets up a make-shift kitchen table, lights a grill, and starts grinding corn. A video camera projects her steady movements onto a large screen that someone moves into the middle of the open space. The woman is present throughout the performance: she’s a ‘character’ in the video, an actor onstage, and she plays herself as the street vendor she was in El Cartucho. Only afterwards do we learn her name: Juana María Ramírez. The audience can see her both on screen and off as she goes about her business of turning out the perfectly shaped arepas, the small corn cakes typical of Colombia, much as she used to on the streets of Bogotá. Audience members can smell the arepas and, at the end of the performance, she invites people to eat them. While this is not environmental theatre in the 1960s understanding of the phenomenon, the audience is transported into an uncanny and constantly changing space.
of social relations, smells, sights, and sounds that is both alienating and weirdly ‘home-y.’ The images onscreen reference yet another set of relations—police overseeing the demolition site as the displaced occupants look on. Both embodied and celluloid, no-tech and high-tech, the performance makes a street of the stage and a stage of the street.

Members of Mapa Teatro roll the large screens in slow motion around the stage. On screen, former inhabitants of El Cartucho give testimony of what their neighborhood used to be. As they speak, the audience sees demolition balls slowly knocking away walls; buildings begin to implode on themselves; dust and debris mushroom and settle down; the contemporary ruins recall post-nuclear holocaust images from sci-fi movies. The city has become the arena of urban warfare, not because the guerillas have come down from the mountains but because politicians have opted for urban renewal initiatives that disappears the poor and obliterate the past. Cartucho (meaning cartridge, but also translated as ‘Lily Street’) is the common name for the Barrio Santa Inés. The inhabitants, however, know that it means desechable, disposable people, homes, and neighborhoods. Its beautiful 1830s vintage homes were abandoned by the affluent long ago as they moved to other parts of the city. The decayed houses became home to the poor, and flophouses for immigrants (or refugees as the performance calls them) fleeing from the country’s conflict-torn interior. Little by little, the government and private companies began to withdraw services. The more prosperous inhabitants of Bogotá shunned El Cartucho as a place of poverty, petty crime, and drug addiction. It was no longer on their map. Soon, a city project dedicated to beautification and revitalization ensured it was not on any map. The fifteen square blocks were razed to the ground and two thousand people were left homeless, their predicament unacknowledged.
In 1998, Bogotá was experiencing the throes of an ambitious urban renewal project undertaken by Mayor Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000). Located a stone’s throw from the president’s residence and country’s center of political power, El Cartucho provided visual proof of the country’s failed social policies. Given the logic of progress and beautification, it needed to disappear. Political ideologies, as Michel de Certeau put it, “transmute the misfortune of their theories into theories of misfortune.”¹ Bad places breed bad behaviors and bad people. Or is it the other way around? The unsightly and unsafe area was converted into a people-free, clean, well-lighted showcase. The model of spatial interaction was imposed from above—not a reflection of what was but what the mayor’s office wanted it to be. Instead of space evoking practice, this one evacuated it—emptied it, transforming space into a concept, a u- dys- or mis-topia depending on who describes it. The Parque Tercer Milenio (Third Millennium Park) materialized the rhetorical commitment to improving national life. The Park was inaugurated in August 2005, and won first prize in Colombia’s 2006 Architecture Biennial.

The performance guides us through the ruins. Former inhabitants’ testimonies onscreen give the lie to ‘renewal.’ Mapa Teatro, founded in 1984 by a brother-sister team, Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden Cortés, is clearly referring to more than ruins as physical remains, rubble or destruction. It refers also to a state of ruins, a government capable of rounded up its undesirable citizens and transporting them to the matadero (the city’s slaughterhouse) without telling them where they were going. The high walls of the matadero surrounded by barbed wire can’t hide the eerie smoke chimney that towers over them. The haunted images of past atrocities underscore the violence of national fantasies of purification that rely on the disappearance of certain populations. After a few days,
the former residents of El Cartucho were dumped off in different parts of the city. No plan or policy had been put in place for them. No one knows what happened to all the dogs that were thrown into the back of trucks and carted off.

As former residents of El Cartucho talk about their old homes, they invoke a mental map of the violently emptied space, the “no-space” as Mapa Teatro calls it, that their area has become. “I used to live here,” says a man, using a pencil to draw a map. He is a witness to himself and to others in the disappeared community. He tells, he points, he attests to the impunity of those who mandated the project from above. The screens juxtapose historical maps with these drawings, calling attention to how the renewal process wipes out, rather than revitalizes, what was there before. Identity of course is all bound up with space. The difficulties former inhabitants have situating themselves in relation to their past also defines their present and future status. Where do they belong? Nowhere, obviously, according to their government. Disposable people do not belong. They are not citizens with rights; they are simply used and discarded.

City designers are only enacting what the military forces in Latin America have long known—by eradicating or shutting down institutions and places associated with past practices they can change a society’s sense and memory of itself. While urban renewal cannot be compared with the criminal violence of disappearing ‘subversives’ in dirty wars, some sectors of the population are slotted to disappear from their homes to make room for new, improved places. Performative uttering’s—calling a barrio blighted for example, allows for a series of policies that eradicate the disease. No one invests in blighted communities or provides hygienic infrastructure and services; the government need not offer educational resources, health services, drug counseling, rehab, or provide
work opportunities. These communities, the logic goes, are ruined already. What’s the point in recognizing members of these communities as cultural agents with vested interests in improving their environment and life chances? The city is the battleground.

The war is not just the war on terror and terrorists but also a war on poverty and the poor. The rhetoric of destroying the village in order to save it takes the militarized language of Vietnam and applies it to urban landscapes. *Ruin* is a political project.

The actors move the four large screens this way and that, arranging and re-arranging the projectors in front of them, bringing the images and sounds up close, juxtaposing them with others, creating a spill-over effect that defies notions of containment. Unlike most theatrical performances, the focus here is not on the actors. They do not speak or tell. They show. They show by moving the projectors and they show too by melting their bodies into the projections. At times they drape huge drop cloths over their shoulders and position themselves in front of the screens, allowing the images to fold their bodies into the scenario. The fires of burning debris become fires on the body. Their bodies make visible other bodies on and through them—much as traditional acting does—but there is a difference. Instead of using their bodies as instruments or vessels that channel other lives, their bodies become screens onto which the experiences of others are projected. The replication and layering of the images illustrate the degree to which bodies and space become stand-ins for each other in the discourse on urbanization.² Situated in the ambiguous yet generative inside/outside, *Mapa Teatro* position themselves too as witnesses to the ruins. They presence and accompany the inhabitants of El Cartucho throughout the process. They serve as their witnesses and acknowledge their loss and trauma—a vital role in a situation where few
will call violence by its proper name. The bodies of members of *Mapa Teatro* also make visible and transmit *to us*—the audience—the memories and trauma of those who suffer the violence of urbanization. Mapa Teatro’s performance process thus involves at least three different aspects—*revelation* (it illuminates and makes visible the destruction of El cartucho and the plight of its inhabitants), *witnessing* (it accompanies the inhabitants and recognizes their trauma), and *transmission* (it passes the knowledge of the experience to the audience). The montage is both a testimony to past pain and a sign of hope—the actors, like the inhabitants of El Cartucho, are able to place themselves, through acts of creation and memory, back in the places that no long exist. They leave a trace, or ‘huella’ as Rolf Abderhalden calls it. They create testimonies and art of what others have deemed trash. And even in this devastated landscape, there is beauty—the warmth and humor of the inhabitants who speak of their lives, the surprising textures and colors of ordinary objects (bricks, rocks, windows), and the rhythm and motions of everyday life. Then *Mapa Teatro* wheels the screens away in a fluid coming and going of images, sounds, voices, and perspectives that make visible not a violent community, but a violent set of social relations. The precision and beauty of the performance simultaneously crashes against and mitigates the brutality of the shown.

Art, as *Mapa Teatro* and so many other Latin American theatre and performance practitioners have demonstrated, can function as a practice of witnessing. Art is not a thing—a beautiful object—but a process, an engagement with those who interact with it. It creates a safe space of encounter, an occasion to tell (*atestiguar*) and be heard. During a four year period, *Mapa Teatro* developed *C’ùndua*, an art project/process encompassing various in situ “install-actions” with the inhabitants of El Cartucho in which they
revisited the space, drew maps, created inter-generational and inter-ethnic memory books, and developed several powerful performances. *Testigo de la Ruinas*, the aesthetic culmination of some of the work developed in the various projects, was completed after the park was built. *C’ùndua* in Arhuaca mythology refers to “the place where we will go after death.” Yet the proposal was, as they call it, a “pact with life.” They wanted to accompany, presenciar, listen to, and acknowledge the subjectivity of those whom the government was so ready to discard in the name of urban renewal: “A well build city is not only one whose spaces and buildings are durable and beautiful; it is one whose spaces and buildings hold a sense of the life of its citizens.” Ironically, the park—an emptied space—is also empty. The desired presence is absent; the upscale pedestrians with leisure-time to walk through the park or sit and watch a performance did not materialize. Yet the memory of the undesired so brutally absented is present. The space makes visible that which has been disappeared. Poverty—albeit banished—has made its way back. As no economic policies were put in place to address the brutal financial disparities, the streets bordering the park increasingly show signs of disrepair. The decline is a sign not of bad people but of bad social practice, of waging the ‘war’ on poverty against the poor rather than against the unequal systems of production and distribution of wealth.

Revelation, witnessing, transmission. How does performance work to make witnesses of the audience? Audiences do not have a chance to be present, to *presenciar*, the original events being depicted. But theatre and performance can allow audiences to experience the testimonies of those who lived through the events. We are witnesses not to the demolition, but to its retelling. *Mapa Teatro* felt that the video performance was not sufficient to create the occasion for witnessing they had envisioned. Asking Juana
Ramirez to join them onstage changed everything. While no buildings or rubble provide the authenticating materiality for the scenario, Juana’s physical presence ‘da cuerpo’ to the scenic space she invites us to enter. Part of our role as audience, we gradually come to understand, is to acompañar her through the re-presentation. She is the link between the ‘here’—captured on screen but now gone—and us, the spectators gradually turned witnesses. Theatre and performance offers a space to transform the trauma of loss into a force for life affirming action.  

Ruins ask us to be witnesses to many different encounters, to accompany and presence the reality of the experience of others. But witnessing works across a continuum: the impossible witness that Elie Wiesel and Giorgio Agamben point to (“we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses”)⁶; the witness to oneself articulated by Dori Laub, the witness to the victim⁷, the witness to the event (Brecht’s “Street Theatre”)⁸, the juridical witness called to the court of Law, and the various kinds of witnessing at a remove—either in time (ruins), space (renovation projects) or through representation. Mapa Teatro’s witnessing makes witnesses of us.

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² The performance follows the transformation of the unruly fifteen square blocks that housed Bogotá’s poor into the orderly, well-lit, and empty Parque Tercer Milenio (Third Millennium Park) protected by the police. On the face of it, the park enacts a set of democratic values, a welcoming vision of safe civil space—a open arena for civic participation (stages, playgrounds, and so forth). In practice, however, the project of urban renovation, with its aspiration to ‘progress’ (new millennium) literally eliminated everything that got in its way. Rolf Abderhalden calls it “un hueco cubierto de verde” —like a tomb. The empty park becomes the site of theoretical encounter. Theoretically, people can swarm around the mini stages that now stand vacant in various corners of the
park. Theoretically too people might sit on the hard benches, built with their backs to each other and to the stages, or walk down the paved paths surrounded by light, or push their children on the swings in the lonely playground. This sterile geography does not welcome interaction. Few people use the space in its new and improved configuration.

3 Proyecto C’Undua: Un pacto por la vida/A pact for Life, a multimedia project produced by the in 2003 by the Mayor’s Office of Bogota and the Bogotá para vivir Association.

4 Proyecto C’Undua, Daniel Vargas, 88.


7 Dori Laub

8 Brecht