

## **Maternal Ghosts: Toward a maternal re-reading of the Chilean neo-avant-garde.**

### **A case study of CADA's actions *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* and *Inversión de Escena* (1979)**

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On the 3rd October 1979, six years into the Pinochet dictatorship, a group of men and women arrived in the working-class neighbourhood of *La Granja* in the outskirts of Santiago, armed with crates of plastic pouches containing a seemingly white liquid. Accompanied by a photographer recording the action, they knocked on residents' doors, distributing one pouch per household. This intervention constituted the first chapter of the multipartite performance *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* (1979), organized by the newly formed collective CADA (Colectivo Acciones De Arte). Subsequent parts of this performance that spanned over several days would involve the publication of a page in the national magazine *Hoy*, the reading of a text entitled *No es una aldea* in front of the CEPAL building in Santiago, artistic interventions on the retrieved pouches of milk and the ritual sealing of the aforementioned milk pouches, copies of the magazine and of the text in a transparent methacrylate box and its exhibition in the gallery Centro Imagen. Furthermore, the action also included two extraterritorial interventions by Chilean exiled artists: in Bogota, Cecilia Vicuña spilled a glass of milky acrylic paint on a pavement while in Toronto, Eugenio Téletz drank a glass of milk and read a text he had written outside the Canadian Congress.

A few days following their first action, CADA staged a second performance in Santiago which, while officially autonomous from the first one, did nevertheless closely relate it. In that action called *Inversión de Escena*, CADA convinced the owner of the dairy company Soprole to lend them eight trucks that were subsequently driven in one single, uninterrupted line through the city until they reached the Museum of Fine arts. The trucks were then parked in front of the building, effectively blocking its access from view: an act of visual obtrusion that was replicated by the unfolding of a large white sheet in front of the entrance.

CADA has been associated with the neo-avant-garde scene known as the *Escena de Avanzada*, that was active in Chile between 1977 and 1983. Composed of artists, writers and theoreticians, the *Avanzada* produced ephemeral, performative and often collaborative actions that

were critical – although not explicitly of the Pinochet regime. The art critic Nelly Richard, who was the leading theoretical voice of the movement, provided a first introduction to the loosely composed group with the publication of her 1986 text *Margins and Institutions. Art in Chile since 1973*. The Avanzada, Richard wrote, brought together “art, poetry, literature and critical writing”, in order to

“reformulate the bond between ‘art’ and ‘politics’ away from its illustrative dependence on the ideological register of the Left while, at the same time, continuing to oppose aesthetic idealism as a sphere separate from the social and exempt from the critical responsibility of denouncing the status quo”.<sup>1</sup>

More crucially, in her advocacy for the movement, Richard appealed to a language characteristic of historical avant-gardes, calling for a continuity between art and life whose “distinction must be severed or blurred in the quest for a vital and urgent restructuring of every form of historical participation in achieving the future needs of the present”<sup>2</sup>.

As both an anti-partisan and anti-Romantic enterprise, the Avanzada aimed to shed light on the state of mental, bodily and emotional deprivation caused by life under dictatorial rule in the country and, thus, to stir awake a numbed civilian consciousness. In order to do so, the works mimicked and, to an extent, exacerbated the feeling of fragmentation that affected bodies and territory alike during these years. As Richard also wrote, “only the resort to the fragmentary - and the ellipsis of a severed totality – can account for the state of dislocation in which the subject finds itself and for whom these fragments now attest of an un-reconstructible unity”<sup>3</sup>.

Richard’s close observation and detailed construction of a theoretical framework to account for the Avanzada has now become central to understand the historical, political and theoretical stakes of actions such as those of CADA. In the past decades however, numerous commentators have criticized what they considered as a monologic reading of the scene, as well as a tendency to “package” its protagonists into a homogeneous movement, despite the evident differences existing

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<sup>1</sup> Richard, N. 2014 [1986]. *Márgenes e Instituciones. Arte en Chile desde 1973*. Santiago: Ediciones Metales Pesados, pp. 15-16. Translations from the Spanish taken from the 2014 re-edition are by the author of this text.

<sup>2</sup> Richard, N. 1986. *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*. Melbourne: Art & Text, p. 91

<sup>3</sup> Richard, *Márgenes e Instituciones*, p.16

between the various artists and groups it included. My aim here is not to question Richard's legacy, who has proved a crucial and enlightening figure when it comes to account for the vitality of artistic life in the country, in the face of a particularly fraught political and economic context. My purpose, rather, entails questioning some of the historiographic receptions of the *Avanzada* in recent and present times and, more specifically, the undifferentiated treatment of its existence as an avant-garde. In what follows, I seek to examine in further details some of CADA's performances in order to identify the limits and potential pitfalls of such an interpretation and to argue that the canonization of Richard's writings (over other authors, and, of certain texts by Richard more than others) may have contributed to overshadow other - less rupturist or belligerent, yet equally critical - interpretations of this scene. In turn, I will suggest that a "maternal" reading of some of CADA's works, by placing emphasis on generosity and care rather than rupture and dissent, may provide further insights in some of the motifs and objectives present in these works.

In 2002, the Chilean philosopher Willy Thayer formulated a damning criticism of the *Avanzada* and of *Margins and Institutions* in particular. Thayer accused Richard of having ignored the political and psychological ramifications of the 1973 coup d'état. The military coup o *golpe*, Thayer argues, could - and should - be read as an avant-garde event in itself. In fact, it constituted in itself the rupturist event so long awaited by all avant-gardes: the one that would do away with the status quo and end linear readings of history. Even more so, Thayer argued, the shocking images of military planes attacking the presidential palace of La Moneda that were seen from all over the world, contributed to literally blow away the frames of representation and representability of modern democracy. "El golpe", Thayer suggests, therefore functioned as both the paroxysm and the consumption of avant-garde, iconoclastic impulses, leaving no institution standing, be they politic or artistic<sup>4</sup>. In the face of this, the fascination harbored by avant-garde theory for institutional attack and iconoclasm appears out of touch, at best, and complicit, at worse, with the rupturist actions of this new military order. It is not with the artists composing the *Avanzada* per se that Thayer took issue, however, but with Richard and with *Margins and Institutions* in particular. By failing to "understand the coup as a structural one and as a point of no-return of negativity", Richard focused instead on reading these works as "exclusively belligerent,

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<sup>4</sup> Thayer, N. 2003, "El golpe como Consumación de la Vanguardía," *Extremoccidente* 1:2: 54-58.

conjunctural, epic and contestary”, thus inviting them to replicate a similar violence and logic of rupture as the one activated by the military takeover itself<sup>5</sup>. In doing this, Thayer adds, the critic drew an unwilling parallel— however unconscious she may have been of it - between the Avanzada and the military coup itself.<sup>6</sup>

Thayer’s critique has its own limitations: it does not, for instance, do justice to Richard’s important contributions to the literature on bodily, feminist and queer dissidence in Chile – a point to which I shall return. Moreover, as Richard points out in her own response to Thayer’s text, he willfully ignored the differences she had originally set up in her distinction between European avant-garde *movements* and the local Avanzada *scene*. “It seems to me”, Richard writes, “that the maximalist reading of the avant-garde implied in Thayer’s universalizing narrative, erases the tactical conjuncture of displacements and re-inscriptions of meanings that granted the Chilean Avanzada its *situational* and *positional* value”<sup>7</sup>. His argument does, however, identify a potential paradox between Richard’s interest in feminist and embodied subjectivities in the works of the Avanzada, and her insistence on using a rupturist and antagonizing filter characteristic of avant-garde theory to account for these works. My contention here does not, therefore entail, re-asserting the provocative – and, at times, exaggerated – claims of Thayer. Rather, following what Richard herself wrote, the urgency of the epoch in which she wrote her first texts – *Margins and Institutions* in particular – did not allow for the perspective that today’s distance permits. It is with this in mind that my examination of a hidden “maternal” aesthetics in the works of CADA in particular and the Avanzada more generally, corresponds to “an effort to recuperate [some of] the eluded zones” of this epoch<sup>8</sup>.

Although members of CADA have repeatedly expressed a desire not to be considered as active participants of the Avanzada, some aspects of their works fuel Thayer’s criticism and open

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<sup>5</sup> Thayer, “El golpe como Consumación de la Vanguardía,” 55.

<sup>6</sup> In the revised publication of *Márgenes e Instituciones* that was published in 2007 by the Chilean publishing house Metales Pesados, Richard acknowledges the belligerent tone of the first version as perhaps somewhat inflated, but she also justifies it with the political context: “La urgencia crítico-política de afilar los cortes de la “avanzada”, para darle mayor nitidez de perfiles y contornos a una sub-escena que el libro quería dotar de visibilidad estratégica y de fuerza interpelante en un medio adverso, forzó el tono del libro a ser más afirmativo que interrogativo”. Richard, *Márgenes e Instituciones*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Richard, N. “Campo y acontecimiento: la neovanguardia artística chilena de los 80”, *Revista de Crítica Cultural*, p. 30

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

it beyond the persona of Richard herself. In *Para no morir de hambre*'s first action of milk distribution, for instance, the photographs recording the action reveal how, despite CADA's careful organization and collaboration with local artists, a certain mistrust and even fear is detectable among the inhabitants of the *población* receiving these unexpected gifts. In the context of the dictatorship's imposition of a State of Emergency that included curfews and the regular interruption of daily life with raids and arbitrary arrests, CADA's interruption of a precarious quotidianity would indeed seem to bear some unwelcome similarities with the armed forces' interventions. Moreover, as one video registering the action attests, there is a certain awkwardness in the demeanor of the artists as they carry out their action. Two of the collective's members, Juan Castillo and Fernando Balcells sport the typical attire of leftist, intellectual males, in a manner that contrasts sharply with the feminine and humble domesticity of the surroundings. Similarly, the presence of the cameraman and the crowds of curious children following the group everywhere and repeatedly asking whether they are filming a movie, further insists on the somewhat artificial appearance of the action.

Similarly, in their subsequent action *Inversión de Escena*, the image of a caravan of imposing dairy trucks crossing the city and interrupting traffic functioned at a same level of visual shock as the ones choreographed by the military – starting with their inaugural bombing of La Moneda. This image was certainly not coincidental for, as the poet Raul Zurita, one of the members of CADA, once explained, the performance sought to emphasize the image of the “dairy trucks as tanks”. CADA would return even more explicitly to these belligerent images in their action *¡Ay Sudamérica!* (1981) which involved flying six small planes above Santiago, “bombing” the city with flyers.

Bearing this in mind, CADA appears to willingly partake in the *Avanzada*'s rhetoric of interruption and rupture which, while characteristic of avant-gardes is also guilty, following Thayer's analysis, of reinforcing a divisive language that had already been coopted by the military. While this trend of interpretation bears some critical valence, I would like to argue that it does not constitute the only way to interpret CADA's works. The first element guiding us toward a different approach to works such as *Para no morir* and *Inversión de Escena* is the core material included in these two actions: milk, as an organic and liquid element which, through both its material properties and thematic associations, might help deflate such a bellicose reading.

The decision to distribute pouches of milk to residents in *Para no morir* constitutes a reference to one of the campaign promises made by Salvador Allende as a presidential candidate in 1970. Allende had vouched that under his leadership, each modest household would be guaranteed half a litre of milk per day, a reference which seems to differ from their proffered agenda of rupture and dissent and introduces, instead, a reparative dimension to the action. Moreover, as an organic matter, milk is often associated to its nourishing and soothing properties, and as an early form of pre-verbal communication between a mother and a child. Understanding milk as a form of exchange is particularly evocative in the Chilean context because it was the very right of people to meet and bond together that was attacked by the military's imposition of curfews and censorship. The violent interruption of speech and the filling of the silence that ensued by the propagandist speeches of the military led to a fragmentation of language that the Chilean sociologist Rodrigo Cánovas has interpreted as a form of "aphasia" – mutism or inability to speak. For Cánovas, the most visible aspects of aphasia give way to "an inform network of signifiers: the equivalent of what linguists simply call noise"<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, reading milk as a preverbal imaginary not only refers to this first embodied form of communication in the infant-mother dyad, it also reinstates communicative and cognitive bonds. In the context of CADA's performance, it symbolizes a redistribution of language, confiscated as it were by the repressive policies implemented by the junta. This interpretation of milk as a proto-abeceary resonates with the very appearance of the pouches of milk distributed to the inhabitants. On each one, the inscription ½ LITRO appears stamped in a capitalized, clearly legible font, recalling the calligraphic types used in early childhood pedagogy. The pouches of milk distributed by CADA thus function as a re-articulation of dialogical structures and the re-weaving of a social textile so profoundly scarred by years of repression and surveillance. This trend of interpretation also resonates with another moment of the *Para no morir de hambre* action: the publication of CADA's text in the magazine *Hoy*. As the collective recalls, they had initially wished to keep the page entirely blank however, the magazine did not allow this and they therefore decided to include the following lines:

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<sup>9</sup> Cánovas, N. 1986. *Lihn, Zurita, Radrigán: Literatura chilena y experiencia autoritaria*. Santiago: FLACSO, p. 39. Translation into English taken from Amy K. Kaminsky. 1999 *After Exile. Writing the Latin American Diaspora*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Imagine this page completely blank.

Imagine this blank page  
Reaching every corner of Chile  
Like the daily milk to be consumed.

Imagine every corner of Chile  
Deprived of the daily consumption of milk  
Like blank pages to be filled.

In these short lines, CADA draws a parallel between the essential properties of milk as a nutrient for the body – especially for young children - and the intellectual fulfilment provided by words – both resources whose lack became so problematic in dictatorial Chile. The insertion of milk as both a protagonist, a motif and an analytical tool to point out the dramatic consequences of the policies of economic austerity and state violence implemented by the junta therefore re-orientates CADA’s work, providing it with a much less rupturist and belligerent tone than the one denounced by Thayer in his text on Richard and the Avanzada as neo-avant-garde.

In her seminal work “Maternal Thinking”, the feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick argues for an ethical commitment to justice and fairness that borrows from attitudes and values that she derives from a maternal position. “Preserving the lives of children”, Ruddick writes, “is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice; the commitment to achieving that aim is the constitutive maternal act”<sup>10</sup>. In the case of CADA’s performance, this description ought to be read at two levels: the distribution of milk as a re-enactment of a policy of social and economic inclusion especially addressed to children might be the most obvious. I would also argue, though, that by looking at the symbolic of milk afore discussed, CADA’s performance also functions as an extension of the maternal sphere of protection, seeking to preserve the lives of all the orphaned

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<sup>10</sup> Ruddick, S. 1995. *Maternal Thinking. Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 19

children of Allende. There is nothing nostalgic in this action. Rather, it is a form of resistance that seeks to defy the politics of division and alienation of the junta and to stir a sense of possibility among the people it addresses. As Ruddick writes further, “[m]aternal peacefulness is a way of fighting as well as of loving, as angry as it is gentle”<sup>11</sup>.

Moreover, this presence of an activist maternal force in CADA’s work may also be traced back to the deployment of notions of care and generosity, which feminist philosophers like Carol Gilligan and Rosalyn Diprose have respectively studied. Generosity, Diprose argues, needs to be rethought beyond the mercantile logic of the gift. Rather, generosity “is an openness to others that not only precedes and establishes communal relations but constitutes the self as open to others”<sup>12</sup>. Neither contract nor sacrifice, generosity’s greatest strength lay in the intersubjective zone it opens between participants. Diprose further argues that the social dimension of generosity follows a circular logic, for a gift retains a part of the giver thus opening the possibility of a creative circularity.

The semi-clandestine staging of CADA’s performances undeniably led the artists to take some risks—risks to be caught and arrested. And while the play with risk has been interpreted by some as feeding into the epic and heroic narrative of the avant-garde artist, I would argue, with Diprose, that, far from spectacular, risk ought to be taken here as such a form of dispossession: an openness to the other in which the milk acts as a social *liant*—as other photographs documenting the action seem to attest. Moreover, the recycling of the milk pouches into canvases for the production of new artworks also partakes in the circular logic of generosity described by Diprose, and which contributes to blur the existing boundaries and hierarchies between acts of giving, making and receiving, between gifter and recipient.

In identifying maternal concern as the funding stone of CADA’s artistic practice, my reading of their works is not as antagonistic to that of Richard’s *Avanzada* as might first appear though. Indeed, by appealing to notions of care, communication and generosity, artists like CADA did not renounce political critique. In fact, they did strive to account for the state of dislocation of

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<sup>11</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Diprose, R. 2002. *Corporeal Generosity. On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

citizens' minds and bodies diagnosed by Richard. Instead of underlining severity and fragmentation by replicating it however, their interventions strived to open zones of intersubjectivity and dialogue that might constitute the first step toward the re-instatement of dialogue and, perhaps, even resistance. In a way, such a strategy prefigures the NO + campaign that the collective orchestrated a few years later and which would go on to become one of the most recognizable visual tools of the opposition in the final years of the dictatorship.

As Andrea Liss writes, “motherhood signals continuation and connection rather than unrestrained power, militaristic advancement, death, the myth of the avant-garde” (Liss 2013).

In this text, I have sought to provide a different reading than the one traditional offered by the advocates of an avant-garde reading of the *Avanzada*. The motivation to provide this alternative reading goes beyond the mere historiographic exercise though. In the Latin American context in which gender roles are traditionally distributed following conservative ideas associated with notions of *marianismo* and patriarchy, a feminist art history needs to intervene at various levels. Beyond the crucial task undertaken by feminist scholars in archiving, collecting, curating and writing about women artists' production, there is also a need to rethink the very method through which one accounts for artists and art movements such as the *Avanzada*. In her own criticism of the *Avanzada*, the Chilean art historian Carla Macchiavello points out a sort of interiorized colonialism in the packaging of the scene for an easily digestible foreign consumption<sup>13</sup> Focusing her analysis on the presence of an important contingent of Chilean artists associated with the *Avanzada* and curated by Nelly Richard in the 1982 Paris Biennale, Macchiavello argues that these artists' association with gestures of rupture and dissidence fed well into the cliché of Latin American art as unstable and violent, so commonly accepted by metropolitan audiences. In this sense, providing alternative frameworks to read artworks, like the one offered here today, contributes – this is my hope – to an effort to revert Latin American history away exploitative and

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<sup>13</sup> Macchiavello, C. 2011. “Vanguardia de exportación: la originalidad de la “Escena de Avanzada” y otros mitos chilenos”, in *Ensayos sobre Artes Visuales. Prácticas y discursos en los años '70 y '80 en Chile. Volumen I*, edited by Soledad García. Santiago: LOM Ediciones, pp. 85-117.

extractive – to use a term recently revitalized by Macarena Gómez-Barris - narratives. In doing so, it also seeks to rethink the very image of the maternal, not as a weak form of submission but, rather, as a strength whose most subversive aspect may paradoxically lay in care and generosity, actions that seek not to rupture but to bringing communities back together.

N.B.: This presentation is part of an article project that seeks to re-examine the *Escena de Avanzada* through the lens provided by the maternal. While this section of the article focuses on CADA, another section – still in early development – considers the family dynamic (and the queering of such dynamic) present in the Nelly Richard – Carlos Leppe dyad during the early 80s, examining, in particular their collaboration on the writing of *Cuerpo Correccional* (1981) and the 1982 performance *Pietá* they held with Juan Dávila. A third section offers to rethink the critical pairing of maternal love and sacrificial gestures, as examined in Diamela Eltit's performance *Zona de dolor*.