

Presently in Beds

Re/mediating the Sensible in Argentine Postdictatorship Performance

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Presence: Here? Now? In Person?

When I first experienced Fernando Rubio's *Todo lo que está a mi lado* (*Everything by My Side*) (2012), the performance was touring New York City as part of the 2014 Crossing the Line Festival. Set outdoors on Pier 45, the intervention invited individual participants to lay down on one of seven beds and share presence with a female actor who would whisper to them a story about loss. The intimate, physical proximity between unfamiliar bodies in a public space left me in tears. While

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the performer spoke about the absence of loved ones, I contemplated our mutual presence in the moment, the *everything by my side*: white sheets, a fellow Argentine crying in Spanish, the sun on my face, glimpses of families on the pier, and the sound of boats on the river.

The second time I interacted with Rubio's work, the world had entered a long-term state of absence due to our ongoing pandemic, and there seemed little to witness by my side. As I quarantined in New Haven, Connecticut, in the summer of 2020, I attended a Zoom performance of *Todo lo que está a mi lado*. My bed became the set and my laptop a portal to the actor, streaming from her Buenos Aires apartment; per the request of the production team, she was the only one allowed to have her camera on. While the title and text of the performance had not changed, its medium and context had altered considerably. This was another kind of presence, one that gained affective intensity from voyeurism and distance rather than direct physical intimacy.

An awareness of body in time and space, *presence* has been a conceptual cornerstone for performance. The durational work of Marina Abramović and site-specific interventions of Rimini Protokoll, for example, extoll the *now*- and *here*-ness of performance.¹ For Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks, *presence* comprises a “being here” in which performers and performing viewers negotiate “tenses of place and time” (Giannachi et al. 2012:11). In other words, *here* is the product of location and temporality, and thus is the situation or scenario in which performance takes place. Participants analyze the location(s) and temporal dimension(s) of situated action(s) happening *by* and *before* them in order to understand and construct their relationship to one another in situ. But as multimediated programming—like the 2020 version of *Todo lo que está a mi lado*—and contemporary streaming performance practices reveal, the *here* and *now* of performance are not as *here* and *now* as one would intuit; there is now a looser idea of *here-about-ness* and *now-ish-ness* that determines an expanded if contradictorily localized sense of presence. That is, telematic performance,² like the Zoom version of *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, is simultaneously in the *here* and *now* of the actor's space but also in the *here* and *now* of a neighbor's home and in the *here* and *now* of one's own bed. Thus, through telematics, the *heres* and *nows* of many people come together.

When the closing of theatres in the United States prompted a turn to livestreaming, archival streaming, and Zoom performance, answers to the perennial question of “is this theatre?” converged around concepts of “liveness.” In Argentina, however, the key term of the season was *presencialidad* or being “in-person.”³ This got me thinking about the relationship between *presence* in English and *presencialidad* in Spanish. Was my experience of *Todo lo que está a mi lado* in 2020, at home on my bed, any less in-person than it had been in 2014 on that other bed on Pier 45? Had I been any less

Figure 1. (previous page) Todo lo que está a mi lado (Everything by My Side), written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Crossing the Line Festival in partnership with PS122 (Performance Space New York). Pier 45, New York City, September 2014. (Photo by Maria Baranova; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

1. Abramović's most famous experiments with the temporal aspects of presence include *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–1987) and *The Artist is Present* (2010), in which she sat at a table across from MoMA patrons, one at a time, for hours. Rimini Protokoll's explorations of the spatial dimensions of presence include *Ciudades paralelas (Parallel Cities)* (2010), a cocreation with Lola Arias in which spectators in Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Zurich could glimpse the situated everyday of others across the world.
2. Sarah Bay-Cheng traces the word *telematics* to Simon Nora and Alain Minc's 1978 report on computers to the French government and notes it “refer[s] broadly to information distributed through digital media, usually in the context of simultaneous or so-called real-time transmissions over digital networks and frequently including some kind of feedback or interactive technology” (see Bay-Cheng 2016:77).
3. When the pandemic resulted in lockdowns and a halt to commercial activity in Argentina, independent theatre artists longed to return to *presencialidad*: for the members of this large and precarious performance circuit, in-person acting classes are the primary way of earning a living (see Mauro 2022).

present? How had this newer experience of *presencialidad* during the pandemic altered my perception of *presence*?

Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks remark, “Temporally, [presence] is discussed as a tense, in its temporality, availability, immediateness,” whereas “[s]patially, it is discussed as occurrence, place, area, site, environment and ecology” (2012:27). For Erika Fischer-Lichte, presence can also be thought of as a heightened form of attention or way of commanding said attention

(2012:108). Therefore, as a rubric, presence allows us to interrogate the entanglements of a person’s relationship to their situation and their relationship to others sharing that presence. It allows us to understand how things come to be in a particular moment, but also how it lives outside of that moment, in the afterlives of presence. Select uses of beds in Argentine performance, like Rubio’s *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, expand an understanding of presence and point toward new digitized potentials of sharing time, space, body, and voice as a public. These examples from Argentina advance a localized understanding of the word “presence” that takes into account the country’s recent history.

From the celebratory takeover of streets after the fall of the last dictatorship in the 1980s to the theatrical activism of *Teatro4identidad* (Theater4identity) since the 2000s, artistic efforts in Argentina have sought to fulfill the mantra of memory, justice, and truth by placing center stage what the civic-military regime of 1976–1983 disappeared: body and voice.⁴ In some postdictatorship plays and performances, the 30,000 disappeared, victims of state-perpetrated violence in Argentina, are conceptualized in relation to absence. These works argue that what disappears never actually does and affirm Rebecca Schneider’s contention that performance can be an “act of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘reparticipation’” (2012:71).⁵ Therefore, the disappeared remain unavoidably present in works of art that treat the historical past.

Despite the oblique connection to Argentina’s historical trauma in these bed performances, by nature of the shared presence between the performing bodies the continuities of that historical violence remain startlingly present. Being presently in bed, then, can re/mediate affective and political bonds in Argentina after the dictatorship. As Diego Sztulwark argues, mounting “a sensible offense” (that is one having to do with the senses and being sensitive to sensation) allows Argentines to feel and think outside the restrictive distribution of the sensible curated by dictatorial neoliberalism (2019:26).⁶

In that sense, this is a study of what Diana Taylor calls being *¡presente!* Part methodology, part theory, part performative, *¡presente!* is the answer to her question, “What can we do when



Figure 2. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Presented as part of Gabriela Nafissi’s curatorial project *Reencarnaciones*. Bodega Monteviejo, Mendoza, Argentina, 2015. (Photo by Laura Limp; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

4. Because the military government vanished bodies and silenced voices, Beatriz Trastoy argues *body* and *narrative* return to structure new aesthetics and make visible what the dictatorship rendered invisible (2002:9).

5. Schneider’s assertions about the remnants of performance in part contest Peggy Phelan’s claims that performance disappears and thus avoids capture and reproduction (1996).

6. “Una ofensiva sensible.” All translations from Spanish into English are my own; footnotes include the original text. I should also highlight the connection to Jacques Rancière’s elaboration of aesthetics as a way of carrying out a “distribution of the sensible,” which “establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (2004:12).

apparently nothing can be done, and doing nothing is not an option?” (2020:2). The attention to the coexistence between performer and spectator in these performances brings attention to the state and action of being *presente!*, that is, the ethics involved in that situated relationship (7). As Taylor concludes, “Holding out one’s hands to others, is the beginning of everything” (250). Taylor thinks through presence in terms of walking and being in solidarity through the metaphor of marches, which is how presence has historically manifested itself in Argentina (e.g., the human rights protests led by Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo); however, I am thinking through presence in seemingly more stationary ways, prompted by the long time spent inside my house during lockdown. The digital activism of the last few years has revealed ways of showing up or being *presente* without being physically *presencial* or in-person. *Todo lo que está a mi lado* prompted me to think: What does it mean to be a horizontal participant? In what ways can the body be moved when it is lying down? What’s possible, even at a state of rest: “when you can neither stand nor sit with comfort, you take refuge in the horizontal, like a child in its mother’s lap. You explore it as never before and find it possessed of unsuspected delights. In short it becomes infinite” (Beckett [1951] 2006:134).

Vertical Silhouettes and Horizontal Bodies

Tracing Absence after the Dictatorship

On 21 September 1983, about a month before democratic elections ousted the military regime, protestors gathered in front of the Casa Rosada for the third March of Resistance.⁷ Alongside them, a crowd of silhouettes rose up on walls of nearby buildings, from Plaza de Mayo to the National Congress; drawn on paper by those present, the life-size outlines stood *in* and *up* for the disappeared. This artistic-activist intervention is known as *El Siluetazo* (The Silhouette Uprising).⁸

A collaboration among a group of artists (Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores, and Guillermo Kexel) and the protest organizers (Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo), *El Siluetazo* exemplifies a recurring communal practice of making manifest the absent bodies of the 30,000 disappeared *through* the present bodies of the living. Despite the ongoing recovery and identification of corpses, the whereabouts of the majority of the disappeared remain unknown to this day. Consequently, their defining characteristic is that they’re gone: they lack material presence and thus are technically invisible. This invisibility challenges mimetic representation; therefore, to overcome it, *El Siluetazo* corporealized disappearance.⁹ By tracing their own bodies onto pieces of paper, protestors embodied those who remained absent and reminded themselves, as well as the repressors witnessing and policing the event, that a violence perpetrated on some was a violence perpetrated on all.

According to Josefina Alcázar, “Discourses of power interact with the body, but the body also interacts with these discourses and disrupts them. [...] The body is individual, and at the same time it turns into an expression of collective denouncement, into a social body” (2014).¹⁰ As activist performance art, *El Siluetazo* expresses a collective body of individuals protesting the military regime. It also reaffirms that a fight for justice in Argentina is a fight for and over the body: for its

7. Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo held annual Marches of Resistance from 1981 to 2006. These 24-hour protests contested the injustices of the military regime. During Mauricio Macri’s presidency (2015–2019), the Mothers and Grandmothers renewed their marches to oppose the right-of-center government’s neoliberal austerity politics.

8. In Argentina, the suffix *-azo* denotes large movements against government oppression, like the series of civil uprisings between 1969 and 1972 that resisted the 1966–1973 military regime: Correntinazo, Rosariazo, Cordobazo, etc. When Argentines protested the financial collapse of 2001, they took to the streets, banging their pots and pans in El Cacerolazo (The Clanger), knowingly named after its revolutionary forebears.

9. Julio Flores, one of the three intervention artists, calls this “la presencia de la ausencia” (the presence of absence) (2008:100).

10. “El cuerpo es atravesado por los discursos de poder pero también los atraviesa y perturba. [...] El cuerpo es individual y a la vez se convierte en una expresión de denuncia colectiva, en un cuerpo social.”

autonomy, for its appearance, for its enfranchisement.¹¹ During the dictatorship, Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo silently protested every Thursday in front of an executive-branch building teeming with military officials; like them, one has to risk their body — *poner el cuerpo* — in order to challenge dehumanization and demand justice. As part of this embodied practice of resistance, artistic responses like *El Siluetazo* necessarily find themselves in a vital exploration of the body as both subject matter and creative medium.



Figure 3. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Montevideo, Uruguay, for the International Festival of Performing Arts (FIDAE), October 2013. (Photo by Lucía Coppola; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

Yet “poner el cuerpo” can also literally mean “to put or place the body,” which prompts the follow-up question of *where*. Where did the bodies of the disappeared go? Where is their absence felt among a communal body? Where do fellow Argentines place their own bodies in relationship to those of the disappeared? Answering these questions requires an understanding of the situation. To establish *where* something or someone is, it must be considered in relation to something or someone else. Consequently, *El Siluetazo*’s call to “poner el cuerpo” powerfully suggests that location or positionality matters to an understanding of the body and its risks.

Because the initial question of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo remains unanswered — where are they, the 30,000 disappeared? — protestors have had to put their own bodies on the line to lure repressive ideologies out into open discourse, so that power may be questioned and truth procured. That is, the greater the number of people showing up in public to demand collective justice for the crime of disappearance, the more the state-sanctioned tactic of suppression became evident. In their actions toward protestors, military officials revealed their guilt, as when they tore down the silhouettes that accused them of a crime and restricted the right of the people to assemble freely, but more importantly, their guilt became apparent in their silence.¹²

In her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body is a vantage point from which one can understand the position of others in relationship to oneself (1994:90–92). It is not a mere passive object, an instrument through which power works, or a signifying medium through which an interior, private life is made exterior and therefore legible in public. Instead, the body behaves like a Möbius strip, in which binary distinctions between inside and outside that split up body and mind don’t apply (xii). With the simultaneous movement between surfaces, the body is always in action.

El Siluetazo reaffirms the becomingness of the body through surface interactions, for as it is traced and erected, it becomes the body of a loved one in the silhouette of a fellow citizen. It is

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11. A genealogy of women and the fight for bodily autonomy links the capture and repatriation of Eva Perón’s corpse, the Mothers and Grandmothers marching for the return of the disappeared, and current demands for reproductive rights and an end to femicide.
 12. During the era of juridical impunity (1986–2005), the children of disappeared parents founded the human rights organization Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio or HIJOS (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence). Since their beginnings in 1995, HIJOS has taken a page from incriminating manifestations like *El Siluetazo* and publicly shamed members of the military regime, who were not convicted for their crimes, in scathing street performances.



Figure 4. *Todo lo que está a mi lado* written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Presented with the Onassis Cultural Center. Orfeos Arcade in Athens, Greece, November 2014. (Photo by Laura Limp; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

a crime scene and thus reinforce the bodily deaths of the disappeared (34–35). They wanted to communicate vitality and resistance with this vertical gesture, one that refused to “bury the dead,” so to speak. But looking through Eduardo Gil’s photographs of the event, I am reminded that in order for the silhouettes to have gone up, actual people had to lay down and be traced. Before the silhouettes went up, before there was a march, there was the first act of solidarity: a horizontal placing of the body. It is precisely by lying down and being vulnerable that the performance first re/mediated the sensible.

First Bed: Midnight, at a Club

From 1983 to 1990, in thrall of democracy’s return, underground Argentine performance reveled and rebelled against governmental, cultural, and theatrical strictures.¹⁴ During the dictatorship,

both bodies at the same time, simultaneously in motion. Though the project curators as well as Mothers and Grandmothers intended the silhouettes to be identical, unindividuated outlines, they gave up on this idea as soon as the organic flow of fellow protestors took over the art. During the protest, the Grandmothers decided they wanted to represent pregnant mothers, to account for the missing grandchildren, too, so one of the project curators strapped a pillow to his body in order to create the requisite silhouette. Other people added physiognomic traits to the outlines as well as names, dates of disappearance, and red hearts (Longoni and Bruzzone 2008:29–30). None of the figures were static. Like the Mothers’ cry of *aparición con vida*, a demand for the disappeared to return to them alive, *El Siluetazo* stirred with a/liveness. Even when these paper surrogates were ripped out, covered over, or weathered, they conserved that spark of life and continued their journey of becoming.¹³ Their vanishing reconfirmed the sinister action of disappearance at work in the country just as their iconographic return in other protests affirmed their continued presence (28).

Per the instructions of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, the silhouettes had to be placed vertically on walls, as opposed to horizontally on the floor, because they did not want to give the impression of

13. In his investigations on the cultural processes of forgetting and remembering, Joseph Roach argues that the living surrogate the absence of the dead, to create a sense of continuous legacy, but that this act of surrogation is not a strict replacement: “The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus” (1996:2). In her own work about the cultural transference of memories and history, Diana Taylor returns to Roach’s concept and contends that this method of forgetting in order to enact the illusion of a continuous lineage is only one model of doing memory (2003:46).

14. This performance scene was referred to by Argentines in English as “underground.”

public gatherings of more than three people had been banned; afterward, masses poured out into the streets of Buenos Aires to celebrate their freedom. Young people, the main demographic target of the dictatorship, claimed domain over the night, partying until sunrise. Clubs and theatre bars, like Cemento and Parakultural, opened their doors to a diverse and vibrant community of artists. Apart from dancing and drinking the night away, underground celebrants listened to the restless music of rock bands, laughed at the irreverent antics of comedy troupes, and lived among the daring experiments of avantgarde performers. For more than five years, the city pulsed with youthful energy, until conservative politics of respectability intervened. Due to noise complaints and the rising cost of rent, performance spaces were forced to shut their doors, and the underground went under (López 2015). This short-lived period coincides with the equally short-lived brilliance of Batato Barea (1961–1991), the self-described *clown-travesti-literario*.¹⁵

Having studied clowning with Cristina Moreira, Batato perfected a practice of collage as both compositional technique and life philosophy. They performed improvised sketch comedy, fashioned costumes out of garbage, recited snippets of poetry, and put together comics from magazine cutouts. While wearing a plastic dress stitched with hundreds of buttons, Batato might let the audience know, offhandedly, in a memorable rasp: “A cow doesn’t give milk: it’s taken from her.”¹⁶ This tastefully vulgar pastiche of recycled trash and poetry—usually played out on Batato’s body—reinforced the primacy of the performer’s presence to their art.

And what presence! During one of their final appearances, at a conference about theatre and repetition, Batato flashed their new breasts at the audience to showcase the miracle of silicone injections and the contradictory present-ness of performance—that is, the way it’s simultaneously spontaneous and rehearsed, both new and new again, but never a repeat. Before displaying their chest, Batato let the audience know, “Repetition in the theatre seems like death to me”; once their shirt was up, they remarked, “This boob repeats that one. And that one repeats this one. But I, do not repeat. [...] I no longer represent. I live one way on and off the stage” (in Bevacqua 2017:13).¹⁷ Through their art, Batato explored what it is to be themselves, though never in a solipsistic sense removed from an understanding of audience. Batato put themselves out there in public for others to see, and their commanding presence asks others to radically be present in their own skin, to not take themselves so seriously, and—as it were—live a little.

In the postdictatorship period, during the AIDS epidemic, as LGTBQ people gained greater visibility in Argentina but were still subject to discriminatory laws and police raids, Batato celebrated life through the cheeky boldness of their actions. These virtuosic, well-timed, phenomenological interventions, like the memorable breast-baring scenario, called attention to their phenomenological body and invited the viewer to enjoy their own as an act of delightful rebellion. Given the dictatorial period of containment that preceded Batato’s performances, the artist’s call to celebrate the body exemplifies the cultural *destape* or sexual awakening/uncovering taking place

15. *Clown-travesti-literario* indicates the three pillars of Batato’s gender and performance identity: (1) Instead of *payaso*, the Spanish word for clown, Batato uses the English term to call attention to their Lecoq training under instructor Cristina Moreira. (2) In Argentina and a few other Latin American countries, *travesti* is a local gender identity that precedes the now more frequently used *trans woman*. To be travesti is to construct femininity through various strategies: clothing, performance, and/or biotechnologies. Activists furthered a trans agenda that eventually secured civil rights in 2012 with the passing of the Gender Identity Law. (3) *Literario*, or intellectual/person of letters, alludes to Batato’s penchant for poetic recitation.

16. “La vaca no da leche: se la quitan.” This is one of Batato’s oft-repeated, trademark phrases. In Spanish, the erotic connotation is immediately evident: *leche* is slang for “semen.”

17. “La repetición en el teatro me parece que es la muerte. [...] Esta teta se repite con esta. Y esta se repite con esta. Pero yo, no me repito. [...] Yo no represento más. Vivo de una forma arriba y abajo del escenario.” Batato is not saying their work is ephemeral (Phelan, once again); they’re merely pointing out that they don’t repeat—a semantic difference worth considering in an academic context that uses theories of “twice-behaved behavior” to describe performances (Schechner 1985:36).



Figure 5. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio, Noorderplatsoen in Groningen, Netherlands, for the Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival, August 2013. (Photo by Karel Zwaneveld; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

in the early years of democratic return.¹⁸ As exemplified by the politics of signaling the robust presence of bodies on the streets of Buenos Aires in *El Siluetazo*, Batato and other nightlife performing celebrants continue to make manifest in public all that power wishes to disappear. Their resistance is “a sensible offense” that insists on the right of marginalized bodies to exist.

During the dictatorship, trans people and sexual dissidents who were able fled Argentina when faced with the country’s heteronormative, cisgender violence. Those who stayed faced cruel hardship, as Batato knew from experience. Even after the dictatorship, democracy brought little reprieve. Ana Gabriela Alvarez notes, “If the return of democratic government in 1982 appears to the majority of Argentine society as a return to a state of rights, it doesn’t include *travestis*. [...] The Police Edicts [against trans women] remained without being discussed and therefore maintained the vigilance and repression over *travestis*” (2017:59).¹⁹ Consequently, for Batato to stomp in heels at night on streets still policed by the same officials who escaped reprisal after the end of the dictatorship meant risking their body. To perform in venues often shut down and raided by these police officers meant risking their body. By existing and celebrating the joys of living freely in public, Batato and performers like Batato challenged dominant modes of cultural oppression while also reminding audiences of the loss and pain that structured daily life.

18. The *destape* occurred during the same years as the underground performances (see Milanesio 2019).

19. “Si el regreso del régimen democrático en 1982 se presenta para la mayoría de la sociedad argentina como un retorno a un estado de derecho, no incluye a las travestis. [...] Los Edictos Policiales se mantuvieron sin ser discutidos y con ello, la vigilancia y represión sobre las travestis, se mantenía.”

Batato's re/mediation of the sensible required calling attention to their nonconforming body as well as their nonconforming use of space; through performance, they effected a heightened awareness of shared presence. One way of resignifying space and resensibilizing bodies within it was to perform, in public, actions previously relegated to the private sphere. For example, in *La cama* (The Bed, 1985), Batato set up a mattress in the recently inaugurated Cemento discotheque, a concrete haven for punk rock with a capacity of more than 1,000 spectators (López 2015:6–7). A handwritten poster let participants know that they could join Batato in bed, one at a time, and partake in an assortment of activities; these could be performed individually or together with Batato. Options included (given in Batato's own idiosyncratic order) reading books, eating apples, lying down, talking, doing whatever, writing, confessing, drawing, waiting, and/or all of the above (Archivo Batato Barea 1985). During the two-hour performance, Batato would walk down the bar dressed in a blue robe, wearing white espadrilles, sporting a pantyhose cap, listening to their Walkman, and holding an alarm clock; they would light incense and share their bed with strangers; they would undress, splash a bucket of water over their body, dry themselves off, and put on their pajamas; they would pee in a chamber pot and sleep (Archivo Batato Barea 1985). Through the performance of these bedtime actions, Batato reminds the discotheque dancers that they could be at home and resting. Batato also calls attention to the boring people who aren't at the club and are at home, instead, getting ready for bed. By displacing the locus of a normative bedtime performance and subsequently transforming a typical clubgoing experience, Batato brings two separate scenarios and sensations of nighttime together.

In a sea of sweaty bodies, in the middle of the night, the clown-travesti-literario stands out in their seeming naiveté, inviting participants over for a pajama party, and yet the intimacy of bedsheets, undressing, and urination sex up the proceedings. Batato seduces audience members precisely through a lack of inhibition that borders on transgressive, even for a nightclub. In a documentary about Batato's life and work, *La peli de Batato*, fellow artists recall other performances in which Batato would offer private palm readings to participants and sometimes flirt with male audience members, even going as far as tickling them (consensually?) (Anchou and Pank 2011). Batato's work crossed lines: of gender, propriety, sexuality, and spectacle. At times they were Batato the innocent clown and sometimes Batato the aggressive pickup artist, peeing in a chamber pot. What I read into their work is the quixotic chase after the virginal aspects of presence, the thrill of the first time, of being off book.

While structured, Batato's work lacked a fixed, dramatic text; moreover, as a performer, they refused to stick to their own script. They preferred improvisation and the immediacy of action. According to Vivi Tellas, a prominent curator of postdictatorship performance who also got her start in the underground scene and even worked with Batato, the artist "hated rehearsals, repeating things over and over without rhyme or reason, and they were into the idea of doing something only once and never again" (in Noy 2001:89).²⁰ The sole constant of their work is Batato himself, their body. As they say in a video interview that includes footage of them naked and getting dressed, "I base my work on a personal version of my life. It's not like I'm doing theatre" (in Anchou and Pank 2011).²¹ In another interview published in the magazine *Pata de Ganso* (Goose Leg; BPG), Batato further clarifies their position as a performer and not a theatre-maker:

BPG: How would you define what you do?

BATATO: I don't want to do theatre.

BPG: How does one not do theatre?

BATATO: You don't do it. Look, every person has a rhythm, but not everybody follows their own rhythm. I try not to deviate from my personal rhythm. I put on music and, instead of following the music's rhythm, I follow my own. (in Archivo Batato Barea 2020)

20. "Odiaba los ensayos, repetir y repetir sin ton ni son y estaba en esa de que todo se hace por primera vez y punto."

21. "A partir de mi versión de mi vida, yo planteo el trabajo. No es que hago teatro."

Here, Batato argues that performance (not theatre) is a being in the now, being present. It is a following of an impulse in the moment. It is a refusal to perform as usual. With their practice and explorations of bodily presence, they countered the strict measures of their time. For Batato, diagnosed with HIV near the start of their career in the mid-1980s and dead due to AIDS-related complications by 1991, their transgressions re/mediated a future absence. As travesti, Batato resisted the deadly heteronormativity that oppressed gender and sexual dissidents.²² As clown, Batato critically faced society to make fun of its seriousness. Their clown name, Batato—a playful alliteration with their last name, Barea, and an idiosyncratic reference to *batatas* or yams—rejects the oppression of Walter, Batato’s given name. The stage name re/mediates the real and confirms the clown’s topsy-turvy agenda of a sensible rebellion. For Cristina Moreira, Batato’s clowning teacher, the goal of taking up Lecoq’s neutral masks in the postdictatorship period, particularly for the youth of the underground like Batato, was to “amplify the effect of transgression that doing things without permission implied, that is, defeat the internalized authority of a de facto power structure that had intervened in the sensibility of adolescents during those [dictatorial] years” (2016:9).²³ Through their performances, Batato Barea modelled an unapologetic mode of being that, all joking aside, was more sensical than the straightjacket of heteronormative violence.

Second Bed: Midnight, on TV

The salaciousness of late-’80s performance culture sought to re/mediate the absence of bodies from public spaces through sensible offenses. *El Siluetazo* and Batato’s work show how this sensibilization is mediated through the performer’s body. But this time period also mediated presence in other ways, and a major mode of re/mediated presence appeared and was transmitted through television.

During the early ’90s, Argentine “sex symbol” and former chorus girl Moria Casán hosted a late-night TV program called *A la cama con Moria* (Bedtime with Moria). Guests, mostly male celebrities and political candidates, would join her for an unconventional interview atop a rounded mattress with a pink, pleated bedspread. The show offered a multiplicity of thrills: the cover of night, double-entendres, lascivious disclosures, and Casán’s “bombshell” body. While guests reclined on her bed fully clothed, typically in suits, the hostess wore nightgowns that played up her sex appeal. If she interviewed a politician about the differences between the left and right, he would have to consider his response carefully while avoiding dropping his gaze any lower than her eyes.

At midnight, on a bed, guests were caught in the moment—a moment entirely different from the more sober, early-morning interviews across a table. As public figures, the guests were out of their element in this nighttime scene; as private individuals, the scene was more familiar. In her talk show, Casán forced her guests to negotiate their public and private personae on camera as they responded to her flirtatious questions, while all they said and did was being broadcast live on national television. *A la cama con Moria* exemplified the allure of presence, which depends primarily on the body, especially when the mouth is at a loss for words. The show also demonstrates a cultural fascination with transgressive observation, a voyeuristic, mediated gaze that radiates from the staged intimacy of a studio stage through the waves and panes of a TV screen, and into

22. From the 1930s to the late 1990s, a series of contested edicts reinforced a gender binary predicated on sex characteristics; in 1973, for example, trans people caught wearing clothing, makeup, and hair deemed unsuitable for a heteronormative expression of gender were sent to jail for 30 days and expected to pay a fine of 50–150 pesos. For that year, the fine represented 5–15% of an average monthly salary of 1,000 pesos on minimum wage (see Simonetto 2016:8; Comisión Económica 1984:294). Some travestis found gainful employment as cabaret vedettes (see Blasón and Rolón 2019). Others who passed as cisgender women risked their lives doing sex work (see Alvarez 2017:54–55). For many trans folk, however, summertime carnivals historically presented a welcome opportunity to transit public space with less scrutiny (see Bistagnino 2019).

23. “Multiplicar el efecto de transgresión que implicaba hacer cosas sin el permiso, es decir vencer la autoridad internalizada de un modelo de poder de facto que había intervenido en la sensibilidad de los adolescentes durante aquellos años.”

the at-home, private real of audiences.

While Batato connected physically copresent clubgoers to the affects of bedtime, Moria reverted the direction of Batato's intervention and connected home viewers with the affects of a cabaret hour.²⁴ Her show also made audible the usually private performances of politicians and celebrities who, outside of their typically controlled appearances, are coaxed into revealing something more personal when tipped toward the horizontal. These men (for the most part) couldn't help themselves but flirt more openly,

more permissively, more sensually. Moria's tactic of telematically transmitting politics at nighttime reinserted the political into the private sphere of home viewers: the site of politics might be the bed itself. For example, Daniel Scioli, then a powerboat racer, appeared in an episode to explain his watery feats. What's he to Casán and Casán to him; why should audience members pay close attention to their interactions and shared presence? Answering that question could help contextualize Scioli in a larger framework in which he eventually becomes a Peronist politician and serves as vice president of Argentina (2003–2007) and then governor of Buenos Aires Province (2007–2015). The audience may very well have wondered, after he appeared on Casán's show, what other beds the politician had been willing to visit, make, and lie upon. Thus, resting horizontally with Moria Casán reveals a way of thinking about politics that doesn't separate private, public, day, and night. It is a thinking brought about by physical and telematic presence, one that radiates an affective intensity directly from bed.

Third Bed: Daytime, in Public

Unlike Batato and Casán, who made their presence felt at night, Fernando Rubio brings nighttime affects into broad daylight. The somnolent figures in his plays and performances speak tensely about things the audience never fully understands, and an uncertain but distinct dread permeates the stage space, whether it is a theatre, museum, or outdoor space. Like Symbolists and other 20th-century avantgardists, Rubio stages metaphors in order to reveal truths about life. Expressed through metaphor, these truths must be felt. For example, in *Todo cerca* (All Nearby, 2004), a family of three talk to one another urgently on a rainy night. Barely lit, the characters are preparing to move to a new home. One of them, the daughter, remains unseen throughout the play, entering and exiting the kitchen with her wheelchair. While she talks from backstage, her brother has their mother sign papers, despite her advanced memory loss. Like the cups of unsipped tea that gradually cool down, the play's atmosphere descends into a chill of recognition: the siblings are taking their mother into a retirement home, perhaps against her will, and stand to profit from this transaction.²⁵

Rubio's choice of set and setting also strongly influences the atmospheric sensations at work in his dramaturgy. In *Donde comienza el día* (Where the Day Begins, 2009), the relationship between



Figure 6. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. *The Cena Brasil Internacional festival*, Banco do Brasil Cultural Center, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, April 2014. (Photo by Conrado Krivochein; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

24. Perhaps not so incidentally, Batato appeared on Casán's show two times.

25. The allegorical quality of the play is reminiscent of a quintessential modernist short story by Julio Cortázar: "Casa tomada" (House Taken Over, 1946), in which a brother and a sister live together and an unseen figure slowly occupies the rooms in the house, forcing them to leave, shutting the door behind them.



Figure 7. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Pier 45, New York City, September 2014. (Photo by Laura Limp; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

present performers and absent figures becomes pressingly evident when staged in the former clandestine detention center, the Ex-ESMA, the former Naval School of Mechanics. Audience members found themselves in six different square white tents within a larger cavernous room where performers talked about fictional loss, meters away from buildings used for actual torture and disappearance. For example, one performer talks about three children on a boat and hopes they return. Inside the Ex-ESMA, the story of the three children on a boat can be read as

a metaphor for the dictatorship: it simultaneously invokes the disappeared, thrown from airplanes into the Río de la Plata, and soldiers drowned at sea during the Malvinas/Falklands War. When the performer says, “Esperamos que vuelvan” (Rubio 2012a:80), the phrase can simultaneously read as “We await their return” and “We hope they return.” Spoken aloud in the Ex-ESMA, these words summon the ghosts of the past and echo the Mothers’ well-known chant: “aparición con vida.” Because of its staging location and the metaphoric quality of its language, Rubio’s performance text interrogates the conditions of its performance, particularly to reconfigure the audience’s relationship to space; he reawakens the bodies of spectators and reminds them of their physical presence.

In Rubio’s most frequently staged performance text, *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, the way the relationship between the content of the piece and its surroundings is interpreted depends entirely on the person receiving the text and the place where the text is set. Staged during the day in public places like museums or parks, it invites audience members to climb into bed with a woman. When staged in New York City in the Fall of 2014, the pleasant atmosphere of Pier 45, with families strolling through the park and boats gliding on the river, complemented the crisp whiteness of the bedsheets, evoking a sense of quiet contemplation.

Each audience member takes off their shoes and lies down for 10 minutes next to a performer who tells them a story. The metaphorical narrative casts the spectator as the protagonist in a childhood memory; the performer accompanies every turn in the brief narrative with a physical gesture directed toward the audience member. For example, the performance begins with the actor telling the audience member to recall a moment when their parents went missing: “There was this one time you were on your own. You were very young; you woke up, and Dad and Mom weren’t there” (Rubio 2012b:87).²⁶ The performer underscores the feeling of lonely desperation and says, “You felt, for the first time, that screaming wouldn’t make sense” (87).²⁷ At this tense moment, she turns to look at the spectator, smiles, and gently strokes their hair.

Other physical interactions include the actor crying, drying her tears, inhaling deeply, and letting out a sigh. The actor performs each touch, each tear, each sigh inches away from the spectator, perhaps eliciting a shared tear. *Todo lo que está a mi lado* synchronizes the audience member’s body with the performer’s. The end of the performance stresses this doubling with a text that clarifies the performer’s previous physical actions and contextualizes the bed’s public setting:

26. “Hubo un momento en el que te quedaste solo. Eras muy chico, despertaste y Papá y Mamá no estaban.”

27. “Sentiste por primera vez que gritar no tendría sentido.”

There's a time to sigh with relief. Relax, enjoy the smells, close your eyes.

Just be.

In silence.

To dream about good things, beautiful things, calm things, listen with joy to the voices slipping away by your side, absorb the air, caress...everything.

Everything in you.

Everything by your side. (87)²⁸

The piece asks audience members to consider what's actually by their side. Rubio's metaphor reinforces the physicality of the world around the spectator and the tangible weight of their own memories.

Because Rubio sets the performance in public spaces, the audience member contends with the sudden clash of a private situation — bedtime — in a public setting with others observing. The hush of a museum would make the speaking of the text itself even more invasive. Outside, where the noise of the city and walkers in the park allow the whispers of the actor to go by unnoticed, the situation itself speaks more loudly, while the words stand out in a museum, where the visual is more usual than the auditory.

The performance uses the charged setting of a bed shared with a stranger to create a sustained focus on the body. The text itself heightens an awareness of the body, which the actor redoubles with her actions, performed inches away from the spectator. It matters that it is the chosen space, the bed, that makes this affective proximity and charged exchange possible.

The bedroom-like locations of Rubio's work allow audience members to viscerally understand and discuss in the public forum of performance the material consequences of the dictatorship. While beds connect Moria Casán to Batato Barea and Fernando Rubio, they also connect directly to the mattresses on which prisoners lay, their limbs bound and their heads covered, in the attic of the Casino de Oficiales (Officers' Quarters). Space isn't neutral: space allows admissions to be made, sensitivities to emerge, as was evident in Casán's late-night political interviews. Beds realign bodies, sensations, and thought; a horizontal position heightens vulnerability as opposed to the strength of resistance in upright movement. Bed performances ask us to contemplate solidarity through fear and intimate proximity, in lying seemingly still, in exploring interconnectedness through the horizontal, in getting us closer to death.

Rubio confesses he was inspired to write *Todo lo que está a mi lado* after dreaming of his dead father one night: "I woke up in bed crying with a sensation of anguish and loneliness I've seldom experienced so strongly upon awakening" (2017:13).²⁹ This fear of death, the nightmares it provoked, and the place in which these remembrances occurred inspired the content and setting of his performance piece. Resting horizontally on a bed awakens sensations that lie dormant in the vertical body; we enter a state of unconsciousness that makes us easy prey to our enemies. As a space, then, beds inherently draw out vulnerable memories. For Rubio, one such recollection was of a Saturday morning in 1980, when he was five years old:

I rode with Dad in the blue Renault 12 to a place outside Buenos Aires. He had to take some documents to a place I'd never been before, and, like every other time I'd been able, I tagged along. On the way there, I fell asleep in the back seat. I woke up to the sound of thunder and a storm that occluded everything on the other side of the windows; I remained standing with

28. "Hay un momento para respirar aliviado. Descansar, disfrutar los olores, cerrar los ojos. Estar. En silencio. Soñar lo bueno, lo hermoso, lo calmo, escuchar con alegría las voces que se escapan a tu lado, absorber el aire, acariciar... todo. Todo lo que está en vos. Todo lo que está a tu lado."

29. "Desperté en mi cama llorando con una sensación de angustia y soledad que pocas veces había sentido con tanta fuerza al levantarme."

my hands resting on the front seats. All I could make out in the rain were the branches of some pine trees that moved like they were going to fall, slow and heavy. Paralyzed, in silence, knowing that no one was going to hear me and that perhaps it was better not to move from the spot, I became aware of being alone in that moment and uncertain anyone would come. (14)³⁰

Though this childhood memory took place in a car, Rubio's adult recollection of it took place in his bed. In *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, he puts a bed in an unlikely space to create that disjunction capable of jostling memories out of the body.

Fourth Bed: Daytime, in Private

In 2020, during the beginning stages of the Covid-19 pandemic when many people quarantined inside their houses, Rubio staged digital versions of *Todo lo que está a mi lado* in different languages across the world. Audience members would Zoom in from their own beds while the performers acted through their smartphone screens. With the actors in their bedrooms and the participants in their own spaces, the overt intimacy and connection to personal, vulnerable spaces that the pre-pandemic, physical performance sought to create was intrinsic to isolated performances. Like the intimacy staged in Moria Casán's TV studio and the connection to viewers late at night and perhaps in bed themselves, the mediated bodies came in contact visually, but also auditorily.

According to Ella Finer, the voice "is a live presence which escapes definition within the binary of presence and absence, oscillating between and within both" (2015:179). That is to say, a voice can be present whether its speaker is visible or not, live or not. The voice therefore also challenges time or provides evidence of its passage. Like light, voice travels and carries evidence of its journey, evidence that must be interpreted or received by something or someone else. In performance, voice then is not just a product of one body, but the product of an emission from one body received in that of another. Finer consequently argues that voice belongs to various people in the performance event: the actors speaking and the audiences receiving these voices, particles of speech reverberating in one another. As Finer explains, "Voice materialized in the bodies of the theatre audience are the momentary property of these bodies" (182). Consequently, the individual voice betrays its collectivity at the moment of audition. It resonates within all and yet belongs to none: "it exists in the time and space of performance also as 'autonomous thing'" (186). In other words, voice carries with it the democratic promise of negotiating distances between bodies; it is a relationship.

Rather than distance audience members from the performance, the overt mediation of the Zoomed *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, like Casán's *A la cama con Moria*, draws in listeners. The telematic performance uses recording technology to pick up sounds that would only be audible in shared proximity. Getting to hear these kinds of intimate emissions creates a sensation of proximity through sound that contrasts with the physical distance between the performer's and the audience member's beds, miles apart and socially distanced. Amplified voices can reach larger groups of people in ways that defy conventional logics of bound space and time. Telematic mediation allows voices to reach out to audiences across great distances; voice carries the body, and thus voice carries an intangible aspect of presence with it, a way of joining many different *heres* to many different *nows*.

When audience members on Zoom performances finished listening to the actor deliver the 10-minute text, they were invited to turn on their cameras at the very end of the performance. We realized then that the performance had not been entirely one-to-one. In the nondigital version of *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, there had been multiple beds, but each interaction between actor and

30. "Acompañé a papá en el Renault 12 azul a un lugar en las afueras de Buenos Aires. Él tenía que llevar unos documentos a un lugar al que yo no había ido nunca y como casi siempre que podía, lo acompañé. En el camino me dormí en el asiento de atrás. Me desperté con el ruido de truenos y una tormenta que no dejaba ver nada a través de los vidrios; me quedé parado con las manos apoyadas en los asientos delanteros. Lo único que veía entre la lluvia eran las ramas de unos pinos que se movían como si fueran a caer, lentas y pesadas. Paralizado, en silencio, sabiendo que nadie me iba a escuchar y que quizás era mejor no moverme de ahí, reconocí el momento de estar solo y sin saber si alguien vendría."



Figure 8. *Todo lo que está a mi lado*, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Presented by the Asia Culture Center. Seoul Plaza, South Korea, July 2015. (Photo by Asia Culture Center; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)

audience member was personal. In this Zoom performance, fellow audience members and I shared the same actor, all on separate beds. I was on my bed, so was the actor on her own, and so were other audience members on theirs. We had all been watching/performing from a reclining position. Though we thought we had been alone with the performer, since the event hadn't been ticketed as a group experience, we were actually digitally co-present with multiple socially isolated Argentines and Spanish-speakers across continents. For a while we stared, across screens, into the intimate spaces of quarantined life. People breathing together, on the same platform, at the same time albeit in different time zones, but painfully if only logistically separated. The presence of such moments cannot be denied. We were *presente* to one another, in-person, if telematically. Our digitized sound resonated within one another, connecting our bodies, re/mediating the pain of absence.

Presence: Beyond Here and Now

Highlighting the physicality of actors, their actions, their conduct, their sensations, their situatedness in time and space, these three performances reinforce the presence of bodies—those of the performers and the audience. Batato makes their body visible through contrasting collage: a body ready for bed at a club, a bit of clowning to suggest the joyous aspects of survival in and through time. Casán broadcasts her exposed body and in turn exposes the sensible at work in the political performances of celebrities and government officials. Rubio makes the bodies of his performers visible through their relationship to space, and the texts of his performances stress the split between what is being said and *where* it's being said. Read together, these performances demonstrate how beds and bedtime bring out a space and time for re/mediating the sensible—for yearning to emerge and for the relationship to sex, violence, politics, family life, and money to appear palpably through metaphor. For some people, like the many people currently unhoused and living on the

streets of Buenos Aires, however, mattresses on corners, in parks, and by bus stops are obviously not metaphor; they are reality, one in which they live the present aftermath of austerity politics, with their bodies in the space that's both bed and home. This work and thinking has called me to be *pre-sente*, connecting beds to others, putting my body in the bed of another. Though it may sometimes seem like it, we don't sleep alone.

Batato, Casán, and Rubio's achievements in performance help us locate dictatorial remains among present bodies and question what it means to be present in Argentina after a period of brutal disappearances, and thus interrogate the tenuous nature of presence itself. As the *Siluetazo* art activism of 1983 demonstrated, Argentines won't take a present body for granted. To this day, every 24 March, on the day of remembrance for truth and justice, people gather en masse in front of the Casa Rosada to read the names of the disappeared. After each one, the crowd chants, "30,000 detained and disappeared comrades, present. Now and always!"³¹ In this public ritual, the crowd offers their bodies and voices to bring the absent back into present life. Within this context, then, postdictatorship performance's focus on body and voice relates, even if tangentially, to the country's past and ongoing transgressions. It confronts or even re/mediates these absences. While performance frequently has been theorized as distinguishable due to its temporal and physical grounding in presence, the work of postdictatorship artists like Batato, Casán, and Rubio reveals that presence exceeds the limits of the actual. In horizontal motion, presence can reach across social spaces and make us virtually co-present, even when we lie in different beds.

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