‘A rapist in your path’: Transnational feminist protest and why (and how) performance matters

Paula Serafini
University of Leicester, UK

Abstract
Since its second public enactment in Chile on 25 November 2019, the performance of ‘Un violador en tu camino’ (A rapist in your path) conceived by the Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis began to make the rounds on social media. Un violador en tu camino is an open, collective performance involving lyrics sung in unison to a catchy beat, and a simple choreography performed synchronously by a group of women in a public space. The performance centres on rape – or ‘the rapist in your path’ – and the lyrics address the structural nature of gender violence in society more broadly. But what is it specifically that makes a performance action powerful in and beyond a protest context? This article examines the values and processes behind Un violador en tu camino in order to generate a deeper understanding of why the performance was appropriated by women across the world. It proposes that it is a powerful, prefigurative performance action because it mobilises participants and appeals to audiences as a sharp denunciation of violence, a demonstration of collective, prefigurative political action and a visually impressive composition.

Keywords
Art activism, Chile, feminism, performance, Un violador en tu camino

We are currently in the midst of a global wave of mass mobilisations, as people across multiple countries and continents are taking to the streets to make their discontent heard. In many cases, as with the gilets jaunes in France, or the mass protests in Chile against...
long-standing inequality, wider unrest is sparked by a particular unpopular economic measure or policy, which acts as the final drop that makes the cup spill over. Once the cup spills there is no containing it, and the protests become about much more than a single, specific measure. Instead, people begin to demand profound changes in society, such as real democracy, the recognition of rights, environmental justice and a fair distribution of wealth. In this context of mobilisation, some of the most memorable images are those of creative expressions that emerge in the streets: graffiti, music, elaborate costumes during marches and performance pieces.

Performances that aim for social transformation and operate in the realm of grassroots politics by intervening public spaces can be understood as ‘performance actions’ (Serafini, 2014). In the context of broader political mobilisation, performance actions can achieve multiple things, from holding space to harnessing media attention, diffusing tensions with the police, allowing instances of creative expression and eliciting reactions from those present – be that joy, sadness or wonder. But there are some performances that go beyond spatially contained effects in a protest context, and instead enact transformations on multiple levels.

Since its second public enactment in Chile on 25 November 2019, the performance of ‘Un violador en tu camino’ (A rapist in your path) conceived by the Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis began to make the rounds on social media. *Un violador en tu camino* is an open, collective performance involving lyrics sung in unison to a catchy beat, and a simple choreography performed synchronously by a group of women in a public space. The performance centres on rape – or ‘the rapist in your path’ – and the lyrics address the structural nature of gender violence in society more broadly:

Patriarchy is our judge
That imprisons us at birth
And our punishment
Is the violence you DON’T see

Patriarchy is our judge
That imprisons us at birth
And our punishment
Is the violence you CAN see

It’s femicide.
Impunity for my killer.
It’s our disappearances.
It’s rape!

And it’s not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.
And it’s not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.
And it’s not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.
And it’s not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.

And the rapist WAS you
And the rapist IS you
It’s the cops,
It’s the judges,
It’s the system,
It’s the President,

This oppressive state is a macho rapist.
This oppressive state is a macho rapist.

And the rapist IS you
And the rapist IS you

Sleep calmly, innocent girl
Without worrying about the bandit,
Over your dreams smiling and sweet,
Watches your loving cop.

And the rapist IS you
And the rapist IS you
And the rapist IS you
And the rapist IS you.¹

The first stagings of this performance, and the speed with which it gained media visibility, made it an especially powerful and timely response to the violence experienced by women at the hands of the police during the recent protests in Chile against inequality. However, while the performance has a spontaneous quality – for example, one of the steps in the choreography emulates the squatting position that women are forced to take during police searches – Las Tesis had in fact been carefully conducting research on ways of making feminist theories available to wider audiences for the previous year and a half.

After the video of the performance in Chile went viral, groups of women across the world began to replicate the action themselves and to adapt it to their own context, from Argentina to France, Turkey and India.² Some tweaked the lyrics to reflect their own vernaculars and the particularities of their own experiences. Others translated it into their local language. More recently, women in the United States replicated Un violador en tu camino outside the New York County Court on the occasion of the criminal trial against Harvey Weinstein in January 2020, later taking the performance to Trump Tower. Protesters sang in both English and Spanish, as they adopted the performance to mark a specific event. Across the world, the performance action and its resonant lyrics touched the lives of many who felt compelled to join the movement. Its circulation and re-appropriation attest to how powerful it was. But what is it specifically that makes a performance action powerful in and beyond a protest context?

There is a long history of performance as a form of political action. Performance art and social mobilisation have a tendency to feed off each other, and indeed several forms of performance art find their origins in performative political action. Such is the case with feminist performance in the United States, whose lineage is to the guerrilla theatre and university uprisings of feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, (which in turn
built on the civil rights movement; Preciado, 2009: 116). But while it is widely acknowledged that instances of bodies in assembly and collective art making can give voice to powerful emotions and feelings of collective empowerment (Butler, 2015; Gould, 2004), it is also worth considering the internal politics of such forms of action if we want to understand why and how performance can enact change.

In performance actions, it is often the case that artistic and political objectives are understood as being in tension with each other. Groups are constantly negotiating what it is that they want the performance to achieve as a political intervention, on one hand, and what they want it to achieve as a work of art on the other. Sometimes, the creative and aesthetic possibilities of performance are not seen as powerful ends in themselves, but rather as mere instruments for achieving particular political objectives. Other times, it is assumed that art is intrinsically transformative, and that a performance of artistic quality has the potential for personal and collective transformation, as an expression that is different and separate from activist tactics and strategies, and which therefore has its own distinctive value and purpose. It is, however, when the artistic and political objectives of a performance are understood as being complementary rather than contradictory or competing, that performances have a better chance of being transformative on different levels, from the individual experience of participants to the collective and the structural. In other words, the most powerful performances tend to be those that adopt a prefigurative approach that considers art as a medium for social and political action, and activism as a social, creative practice (Serafini, 2018).

Art activism thus becomes an aesthetic–political practice through which we can build specific ways of relating to each other and acting collectively towards achieving social and political transformations. Because of the understanding of art and activism it puts forward, and the forms of agency and action it facilitates, Un violador en tu camino can be read as a case of prefigurative art activism.

Un violador en tu camino displays an ethos of collective ownership and horizontality; it was conceived by Las Tesis with the aim of enacting some of the transformative theories of feminist thought – in this case, specifically Rita Segato’s (2003, 2016) work on rape as a moralising and political act of domination. But the performance action came into being and evolved with the social protests in Chile and women’s responses to the violence experienced at the hands of the police, and continued to develop and shift as it travelled the world. Each new enactment similarly involves no distinction between artist and participant, given that the collective that created the first performance has no presence or say in how it is interpreted and taken on by different groups. While in each particular case there is a person or group that takes it upon themselves to organise a local version of the performance, this has tended to follow the dynamics of grassroots organising rather than those of institutional, participatory art. As such, the organising processes are more open and porous, even when, due to practical reasons, one or more people take on a coordinating and facilitating role. In order to achieve horizontal participation, the lyrics and steps of the performance are deliberately easy to learn, making full participation accessible to most. At the same time, the potential for adaptation of Un violador en tu camino has been crucial to its accessibility, giving rise to performances where wheelchair users join the frontlines, and others where participants maintain the basic choreography while reproducing the lyrics in sign language.
But, despite its simplicity and fluidity, the combination of words and movement performed simultaneously by rows of participants – sometimes in the hundreds – is aesthetically stunning, and affectively moving. The song puts into words that which has been silent for too long: It is the system that is killing us. It is the government officials and police officers. It is the judges. It is you. Participants in the performance are speaking truth to power in a collective act of denunciation that marks a point of no return: We are no longer silenced, and you are no longer shielded. The result of this approach is a performance that allows participants to feel empowered as political subjects through an instance of political and artistic participation. Their bodies in the street are simultaneously demarcating a feminist space of political action and of collective creative expression. Through their song and their movements they are protesting, but they are also enacting a series of values such as sorority and (transnational) solidarity, horizontality, collectivity and the accessibility of both political and artistic participation.

The original performance in Chile and its subsequent enactments went viral on social media, and also succeeded in attracting significant attention from major media outputs. This can in part be attributed to the spectacular value of the performance – large groups of women singing and dancing in unison at landmark locations across the world. But the spectacular quality of the action must not be considered as detrimental or contradictory to its prefigurative value. Rather, this performance action could be thought of as a case of ‘ethical spectacle’ (Boyd and Duncombe, 2004), in which artists and activists appropriate the communication tools of an intensely mediated society while maintaining processes and values that allow the action itself to be participatory, contextualised and emancipatory.

*Un violador en tu camino* is thus a powerful, prefigurative performance action because it mobilises participants and appeals to audiences as a sharp denunciation of violence, a demonstration of collective, prefigurative political action, a visually impressive composition and a song that stays in our heads and our hearts. The effects of the cup spilling over are indeed already visible: The collective *Las Tesis Senior* in Chile, a group of women over 40 who came together around the performance of *Un violador en tu camino*, announced in January that – inspired by this performance and how it brought women together – they would be registering a new party called Partido Alternativa Feminista (Feminist Alternative Party). One of their aims is to encourage the participation of women in the April referendum, which will determine the future of the project for a new Chilean Constitution.² In contexts of violent repression of protest, engrained media bias and governments that refuse to listen, performance actions can open up spaces of communication, of transnational movement building, of empowerment, of resistance, of solidarity, of organising and of creative embodied expression.

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**ORCID iD**

Paula Serafini [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4278-1832](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4278-1832)
Notes

1. English translation featured in the Facebook event for the London performance of ‘A rapist in your path’ on 14 February 2020, organised by local feminist collectives (see https://www.facebook.com/events/182969046107422/). The ninth verse of the song is an ironic reference to the hymn of the Chilean Carabineros (police force).

2. For a map of locations where the performance has taken place so far, see http://umap.open-streetmap.fr/en/map/un-violador-en-tu-camino-2019_394247#2/30.6/-19.3

3. See, in Spanish, https://www.cnncchile.com/pais/partido-alternativa-feminista-lastesis-senior_20200128/

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Biographical note

Paula Serafini is a cultural politics scholar. Her research looks at cultural production and cultural labour, art activism, social and environmental movements, extractivism, and alternatives to development, among other issues. She is author of Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism (Routledge 2018) and co-editor of artWORK: Art, Labour and Activism (Rowman & Littlefield International 2017).