

Tear Gas Democracy

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BACKGROUND

The use of tear gas in combat is nothing new; in fact, Spartans took advantage of sulfur gas as a military resource in the 5th century AD. Contemporary history indicates that this irritant was used during World War I, when the French army included 26 mm grenades with tear gas in its arsenal. These grenades and spray versions became a common resource to dissolve public demonstrations in Latin America in the 1960s, and are still the quintessential tool against revolts in the streets, even though tens of years of scientific research have shown that tear gas is a poison that affects the health of human beings. In the 1990s, for instance, more than 70 people have reportedly died in police custody in the United States related to the use of pepper spray (cf. Smith/Stopford 1999). Pepper spray has the same ingredients as tabasco sauce, but at much higher concentrations. Tear gas, or CS gas, is mainly made from chili for its high content in capsaicin, which irritates the mucous membranes and the respiratory tract and is used by state forces to disperse public demonstrations, protests and riots. Being exposed to this gas for a long time can cause lung, heart and liver damage.

WHAT ARE PEPPERS (CHILI)?

The term ›chili‹ (from the Nahuatl word »chilli«), also called ›aji‹ in South America, refers to the immature, mature or dried fruits of a few species. The

fruits of most varieties of hot peppers contain high percentages of capsaicin and related compounds, collectively called capsicoides.

The capsicoides bind to pain receptors in the mouth and throat that are responsible for the sensation of heat. These receptors send a message to the brain that something hot is being consumed.

Chili also has cultural purposes other than being used as food – as a medicine used by healers and shamans to treat coughs, tooth infections, and cultural diseases such as ›evil eye‹. It is believed that the smell of burning chili scares the impure beings: when a living being is exposed to this smoke, it gets purified.

JUSTIFICATION

To develop the performance *Tear Gas Democracy*, I combined my experiences as an activist - fighting in public confrontations – with my college education in gastronomy that introduced me to the work with chili in traditional Mexican cuisine.

My college education was in the field of gastronomy, acquiring knowledge in food chemistry, nutrition and sensory evaluation, obtaining scientific and technological knowledge of food. My work as a performance artist has developed in civil protests, formulating tactics of social articulation, generating various aesthetic strategies. As an activist, I participated in the fight for the legal recognition of homosexual couples in Mexico, and have been part of the organization of the 2012 and 2013 Gay Pride in Mexico. I have also been an activist in the #YoSoy132 movement and the camp at the Monument to the Revolution, where I was in charge of the kitchen.

My college preparation and my work as an activist led me to develop this performance. On the gastronomy side, I have been in contact with the dried chilies used in Mexican food recipes and preparation; many involve fire-roasted chilies that create a suffocating smoke. On the other side, as a political activist, while fighting in public confrontations, I did compare the effects of tear gas with burnt chili smoke.

Many people, invaded by fear of tear gas, go in shock and hurt themselves by not acting in an appropriate manner: crying and running scared; something normal: humans fear what they do not know.

I proposed a performance in which activists would come into contact with the smoke of burnt chilies so they could experience a similar dynamic to a police brutality confrontation, asking participants to face their fears. I was also seeking for a positive impact on the minds of the participants, using the magical and healing side of chilies. I intended do the same and tried to achieve a magical spiritual healing for the participants.

WARNINGS TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION

Tear gas and burnt chilies irritate the mucosa of the eyes, causing tears. If this happens, apply milk of magnesia mixed with water; this formula removes the burning from skin and eyes. If eyes are burning or if the vision is not clear, they should be washed with clear water for 10 to 15 minutes. If contact lenses are used, they have to be removed with freshly washed hands.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Smith, C. Gregory/ Stopford, Woodhall (1999): Health hazards of pepper spray. In: North Carolina Medical Journal 60/5, pp. 268-74.

