

Set Fear on Fire!

A Conversation with the Collective LASTESIS on Aesthetic, Performance and Feminist Resistant Practices

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LASTESIS is an interdisciplinary feminist collective from Valparaíso, Chile, founded by Sibila Sotomayor, Daffne Valdés, Lea Cáceres, and Paula Cometa. During the political uprising in Chile in 2019, the collective created the performance “Un violador en tu camino” [A rapist in your path], where they denounced the sexual violence experienced by women and people from the LGBTQIA+ community in this political context. This performance was later replicated worldwide by other women and people from the LGBTQIA+ community who wanted to denounce the systematic violence, especially sexual violence, experienced in their local contexts, through their bodies and voices. The practice initiated by LASTESIS thus helped build a new form of global feminist protest.

In this interview, we talked with LASTESIS about the relationship between performance, feminist aesthetics, and politics as well as their 2021 feminist manifesto “Quemar el miedo” [Set fear on fire] (Verso 2023).

In what sense can performance be a tool for emancipation?

Sibila: Why a tool of emancipation? For us, the fundamental element of performance is something concrete; it is the body that is a characteristic of performance in general, not only the artistic performance but any manifestation that comes from the body. That is also linked to this idea of action, which is

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closely related to this concept of the performative, which is not the same as the performatic, but that does not matter.

The point here is that the basis is the body and what happens with the body according to what we have been reflecting on and reading over the years. This is how we have been working. Our first work addresses this issue, for example, how the oppression of women's bodies sustains the capitalist system, as Silvia Federici states. Being a Marxist herself, she makes this important critique of how Marx specifically did not consider the reproductive sphere that sustains capitalism.

Hence, it is crucial to understand, structurally and systematically, how the bodies of women and people with the capacity to conceive a life, whether they are women or not, ultimately sustain the capitalist system, the capitalist production. Moreover, the unpaid work of childrearing, raising new workers, new women workers, etc. Then we add other dimensions, such as the body as an object; we see that the body is understood as space and territory of oppression, a territory of extractivism. We can consider it as a *Cuerpo-Territorio* [Body-Territory], which is part of this extractivism that keeps the capitalist machine transforming itself.

So, what happens with the performance that sustains those bodies? The body is the protagonist, and there we see a major change of focus that shifts from being a territory of oppression, which of course continues to be so, but it also becomes a weapon of struggle, of resistance; it becomes the territory, the materiality, the place from which you enunciate, activate, and fight against these oppressions.

This exercise of re-appropriation generated by the body's performance is fundamental because sometimes it is taken for granted, as if "yes, the performance makes the body, it does not matter". But we must consider the significance of these bodies, their vulnerability, and what it means for women's bodies and dissident corporealities of the sexual-gender system, for example, to occupy the public space to manifest themselves. Those vulnerabilities that we have in the public space, that sometimes other bodies do not have, are not insignificant.

This political exercise is very important. Hence, our decision to work with performance, even though we are an interdisciplinary collective that expresses its opinion using different languages, the basis of our work is always the performance; it is our bodies.

We as performers are constantly activating [our bodies], whether on a stage with our work, in the street, at a concert, or a demonstration in a public space.

This is always present because we also believe in the transformative potential of performance, of how a body activates the political in a way that generates changes for the better, disturbances, and changes at the level of institutional politics, for example, regardless of whether we are militants in that sphere.

If you consider there is such a difference – what might be the effects of the performances on the audience?

Lea: I think we do not worry about the effects. Yes, one does consider and work on some functions related to art, and from art to the performatic, that hopefully mobilizes and raises awareness in the observers. Then, when you are part of it, it may change some ways of perceiving the body itself. But as an implicit intention of the creative process, like “this is going to happen, this is going to be,” no. That happens more naturally.

Dafne: Perhaps we mainly consider that we usually summarize some other author’s thesis and our concern is how to transmit this thesis. This synthesis should be given in the best way and using different languages, whether we share this thesis through the body of the performance, projection, music, a flyer, and whatever elements we consider necessary for communicating these ideas.

We hope that our ideas reach as many people as possible, keeping in mind that people have different ages, backgrounds, forms of understanding information, and of relating to each other, among other things. Perhaps this is what we consider the most.

Sibila: It is not that we are not concerned about the effect on the person. On the contrary, there is a concern, as Dafne says, to reach that person from different stimuli, languages, and that means looking for an active role in that person. We do not want passivity, we do not want them just to sit and watch something, and nothing happens. We want people who watch, and something happens.

But it also affects the audience, meaning that everyone is touched or connected by it from different perspectives. It is in the sound for some, and for others, it is more on the body. Some people reflect more on the idea itself, but our intention is always to mobilize, which means there is a place for action, not passivity.

Lea: There is an aesthetic concern that there is a continuous line between the performances and how they communicate with each other aesthetically. There is a viscosity. But we have no control over the rest, like the emotional part of it.

What do you consider feminist aesthetics, and how is it framed in creating your performances?

Lea: For example, a very common, symbolical element when we do workshops is usually the *capuchas* [masks]. The *capuchas* are an aesthetic and iconic symbolism connected to the history of women's public demonstrations in the public space. So, there are some elements that one clearly takes back because it enables others to identify with this image, but we also try to create our own visual identity.

One that we call our own but probably is not. Instead, it is something more closely connected to our visual resources of the territories, of our background of references. It is like a mixture of many elements generated in the context, although it has a language, and references and evokes many other feminist manifestations. It also seeks to be something that is refreshing in feminism: brevity. That says a lot about our time, memes, quick information, and the minute that the reel allows you.

Sibila: The other aspect is our goal with the collage methodology, where there is no hierarchy of one element over another, but this idea of viewing the work as a kind of landscape and being able to see all the elements simultaneously and choose what you relate to, a search for non-hierarchies. Also, horizontality at a structural level that is neither linear nor ascending. We feel this is a feminist way of approaching performance in terms of content and form.

The way the performance is structured and how we also organize ourselves as a collective, to position ourselves as a horizontal collective. Not to say this person does this and that, if you ask us, of course we will say it, but it is a very different logic from the traditional one of the great dramaturgic adviser, the great director, the great artist with a name and surname, the genius artist. We have a feminist way of approaching creation and how we organize ourselves to create.

In your book “Set Fear on Fire” you refer to Judith Butler and Silvia Federici to talk about bodies, but you also analyze the collective dimension of care. What does it imply to think about care on a collective level?

Sibila: Well, as we said before in reference to Silvia Federici, care and the reproductive dimension are not included in the capitalist production system. So, there is also this critique of why care is always left to “mothers”.

It is also related to aspects that we mentioned in the book regarding family structures. Silvia Federici talks about the nuclear family in which there is a mother, a father, and children. How the family model is created and how society, in general, is designed for it, from public policies, taxes, and many other things. Everything is conceived for that model because it sustains the capitalist system and now the neoliberal one.

Then, the question we ask ourselves and those around us is that many times family configurations are not like that, instead, they are different. Familiar bonds are also diverse, they are configured in different ways, and not necessarily by sexual-affective or biological aspects. This is when we begin to think of the family in another way and how care work could be conceived differently. For example, with a communitarian approach. These are not models that we came up with but models that have existed historically. Besides, in countries like ours, the same-sex parent or single-parent, for example, of a mother, grandmother, or aunt, are very common.

In sum, we think of family and familiar bonds differently and, therefore, we have a different perspective about care.

Your book is titled “Set Fear on Fire” and contains several references to the idea of burning, burning the patriarchy. What does this mean more concretely? What does it mean to burn the patriarchy, or how should we burn it?

Daffne: The reference to burning or fire actually has to do with transmuting, how to transform something so deeply rooted that constitutes the foundations of our entire society as a patriarchy. You cannot reform it. The only way is to transmute it all, burn it, and then start again.

That is the idea. It doesn't work [...] I mean, there are changes, advances, and laws. For example, the law against street harassment. Indeed, it is an advance, a debate that congress would never have carried forward many years ago. Still, it does not solve the fundamental problem of ongoing violence against women or sexual dissidents. It is like we would have to start all over again to build a society without a patriarchal base, and fire has to do with that. It is related to the ritual aspect.

Lea: Burning fear because it has kept us silenced, because it has created intellectual obscurity in human evolution of not having the same historical relevance that masculinities have had. I believe that fear is something that we all usually live with. Some of us control it better, some don't. Still, I think

this is an invitation to burn the fear in communities, collectives, learning and researching our ancient ways of seeing society.

Daffne: Yes, to see fear as something that paralyzes and immobilizes. Then it is about doing the opposite.

What do you think about the critics within the left itself who consider that performances and other repertoires of street protests are not very effective instruments for a political practice of emancipation?

Sibila: In fact, we have a very clear and concrete position on this issue, and our perspective is that the class struggle and the feminist struggle are not two different things. We think the feminist struggle is as subversive as other social and political struggles. Feminism is also mobilizing this from the grassroots and it is through feminism that we are going to be able to find solutions to these problems. This insistence on saying that the feminist struggle disunites is basically the expression of misogyny.

To say that it undermines class struggles, changes the focus, etc., relegates us eternally to a second, third, fourth, or last category. To say indeed that feminist struggles are not as important as the class struggle is a perspective that for us is obsolete because they are not, they cannot be separated, they go together.

We state in the book that the enemies of feminism or feminisms are everywhere, they are not only among right-wing conservatives but also in other political spheres, and we hope, of course, that this will change.

Lea: I also think that we should communicate to these people that they do not seek freedom. Their quests are archaic and precarious. Their sense of collectivity is quite null.

If they continue to disintegrate feminisms and actions for freedom in the streets without understanding them, considering them as something that divides, they should go home and sign a resignation paper because they do not know what is happening. They are in a situation so alienated from *realidades comunes* [common realities] that, hopefully they will withdraw from *lo común* [the common].