

Art and Activism
by Natalia Chamorro

It's warm and light on the 8th floor of the library. Far from the park grounds, you can hear in the corner of your ear the solo of a sentimental saxophone. At this height, the emotive shouting of spectators in the park doesn't disturb the people studying in this illuminated room. Here we are alone yet together in our seats and with our books, eyeglasses and laptops, Red Bulls, water bottles, headphones. I break a piece of my chocolate bar and focus on how outside that saxophone is singing to the dog playing and people chatting in the park benches, while here, on the 8th floor, its musical tones feel like the ethereal texture of a cotton candy in a girl's hand that is passing by.

I came to write and read. Yet how would it be if I had come to talk and think with all these people? How would it be if we were here to plan, let's say a revolution? I also came to find a book about performance and activism. I looked for one but ended up taking four books about performance and theatre. To get them, I swam; I went deep on the PQ river of books while listening to my boot heels clicking hard and proud to the expected silence. Since my diving is temporary, the silence can't do anything but endure me.

How not to enjoy this partly sunny Sunday, alone yet surrounded by quiet students in the library. I am performing a persona, the student in the library. Them and me. We are all just pretending and we like it. I know I do. Just like I am pretending I need no one to feel engaged, excited, dreamy, strong. Enough.

How do you pretend courage? Not so long ago, I went to a symposium to listen to artists and activists talk about a phrase that echoes here and there: "art as a platform for social change." Yeah but how, I asked in my head. It took me a while to understand it conceptually; it is actually still taking me time. However I understood it in my body, my skin, in my feelings. How courageous, I thought, is to believe. Yet this is not believing more than it is feeling. Can we change people's minds if we change how they feel? How do you construct feeling?

Like before, when I would look through the back window of the school bus, to see if the tallest building was still in sight, and it felt that the building was following us—it always was, like a huge dragon—the saxophone music of the park, every time I stare out of my laptop, I feel that it is following me in this writing ride.

Now there are some drums too, outside in the park.

Why does the body feel like moving when hearing drums? I was amazed, perplexed, fell into an empowering love at once, when I saw in front of me this group of women, all with a drum tied to their belt, dancing to this youthful, repetitive and fast pace rhythm of the drums. They were one of the many groups that gathered in a plaza to walk together to the congress building. Always the congress building, where our laws are tough and signed, laws that protect us or debilitate us. It was a women's march. If not on paper, not yet, this march was inscribing a new law, a cultural one.

A *batucada*, that African Brazilian percussive rhythm that makes you feel all your body just by listening. I felt like crying. I could not understand this kind of overwhelming

emotion that was mixing with other strong emotions, such as the feeling of being connected with others, of being alive, of being loved, of being.

My first time in a march I was afraid and excited. In Lima, any march is something that can turn bad. No one in my family knew I was going. I went to the march with my performer artist friends and we met in a studio before going to the march. I was not courageous enough to contribute to their planned performances so I helped by making banners and in sewing panties stained with red painting to a clothesline. These panties symbolized all the women, mostly teenagers, who continuously die in clandestine abortion clinics in Lima. The banners had phrases such as: “her body her decision,” “I had an abortion,” “Let her decide,” “We want us alive.” More than the banners, I particularly liked when in the march we sang, “anticonceptivos para no abortar, educación sexual para decidir, aborto legal para no morir/ contraceptivos so we don’t have abortions, sexual education so we can decide, legal abortion so we don’t die.”

That day of the march everyone gathered in one of the old circular plazas of the historical center of Lima that are surrounded by the worst traffic. When I got there with my performer artist friends, I saw how people were already getting together, writing banners and overall getting excited. In the middle of traffic, pollution and encircled by colonial style buildings that unfashionably hosted overtly colorful political and commercial billboards, I felt like for the first time I was excited to be Peruvian, to be a woman, to be among women and Peruvians. I guess these terms never felt attractive before; they still don’t. Yet, in this particular time and space, they felt mine.

From one of the avenues that ended in the plaza we heard a noise louder than the cars’ horns. They were the feminist student group from one the oldest universities of Perú, and Latin America by the way. They arrived with the energy of true warriors. I felt like if something goes wrong, they would survive.

I want to believe I could show such a strength that makes a throat tremble with emotion, perhaps with my writing. Perhaps I can make someone feel courageous in many parts of their being. Or at least feel without needing to understand it all. Perhaps, I want to believe, I can send *batucada* drum sounds from my fingertips in my laptop towards someone else’s eyes. Even if that someone else is only me.

It’s getting darker and emptier on the library floor. The saxophone might have gone home already. It will come back.