Performing Tlatelolco and the Past That Never Dies

*Auxilio: Au secours and El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado*

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The Mexican student movement culminated on 2 October 1968 with the slaughter of an undisclosed number of students and innocent bystanders in the Plaza de Tlatelolco of Mexico City. The 50th anniversary was marked in 2018 with museum exhibitions, lectures, documentaries, new publications, and reprints of prior ones, as well as the Memorial 68 organized by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), which included four theatrical productions: *Conmemorantes* (Commemorators; 1981, Emilio Carballido), *La hecatombe*

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Performing Tlatelolco

Figure 1. (facing page) Luisa Pardo narrates a short video in the viewing gallery of El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. KunstenFestivaldesarts, Brussels, 16 May 2018. (Photo by Ewa Iwicka)

While these four plays performed in theatres on the far-flung campus of the UNAM, two performance pieces related to 1968 were staged in the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco (CCUT) that overlooks the emblematic plaza in which the massacre took place.

It was not difficult for the government to cover up the slaughter given that it controlled, if not owned, all forms of media. It was just 10 days before the opening of the Olympic Games in Mexico City and President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz took drastic measures to ensure that the games took place and the world saw a peaceful, democratic, and modern Mexico. As a result, a definitive number of dead and disappeared was never released — estimates range from 25 to more than 300 — no one was held accountable, and the only admission of guilt was made by President Díaz Ordaz in 1970, when, before leaving office, he accepted all responsibility.

Those responsible have never been tried. This includes Díaz Ordaz’s successor, Luis Echeverría, who not only oversaw the events of 2 October but also ordered the disappearance of hundreds of guerrillas and other activists during the 1970s. When the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) finally lost the presidential election in 2000, President Vicente Fox released many of the military and police files pertaining to the 1968 massacre and set up a special prosecutor’s office to determine if charges were warranted. His successor, Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), not only did away with the special prosecutor’s office and ordered the reclassification of released archives, he also unleashed the drug war that has taken tens of thousands of lives. Needless to say, the question of Tlatelolco was ignored when the PRI regained control from 2012 to 2018 under the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto, whose only response to the continuing cry for justice was simply to acknowledge that Tlatelolco was indeed a state crime. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected in 2018, has promised to renew inquiries and to seek justice for those killed in the 1968 massacre.

Unique among the hundred or so plays that have been categorized as “Teatro del 68,” Auxilio: Au secours (Help!: Help!; 2018, TeatroSinParedes) and El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado (The Past Never Dies, It’s Not Even Past; 2018, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol) are collective creations that transcend the confines of conventional theatre, use the present as a lens through which to re-view the past, and force spectators to look at 1968 not as an unshakeable trauma

1. Curiously, all but Conmemorantes — staged each year on 2 October in commemoration of the massacre — are farcical. In addition to the three farces presented as part of the Memorial 68, another, Olimpia 68, written in 2008 by Flavio González Mello for the 40th anniversary, was restaged with support of INBAL (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura) and then selected to close the Muestra Nacional de Teatro later that fall. And finally, David Olguín offered his raucous farce México 68 at el Teatro el Milagro. This predominantly farcical approach to 1968 is not an expression of irreverence, but rather of the absurdity of Mexico’s endless cycle of violence (see Bixler 2020).

2. During the past 50 years, at least 100 plays have taken up the topic of Mexico 1968 and the student movement. The style and tone have varied as a result of censorship, self-censorship, and theatrical trends. Early plays, for example, relied on metaphor, allegory, farce, and the absurd to refer indirectly to the events of 1968, while plays of the ’80s and ’90s focused more on the question of memory, both that of family members who lost loved ones in the Tlatelolco massacre and that of former activists. Recent milestone commemorations in 2008 and 2018 have inspired new works. For more on the theatre of 1968, see Bixler (2002), Guyomarch Le Roux (2007), and Harmony (1992).

Figure 1. (facing page) Luisa Pardo narrates a short video in the viewing gallery of El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. KunstenFestivaldesarts, Brussels, 16 May 2018. (Photo by Ewa Iwicka)
that tethers them to the past but as a moment that defines their present and will dictate their future if they do not move beyond mere spectatorship.3

Along with a referential grounding in 1968, Auxilio and El pasado nunca se muere share a mix of genres, a tripartite structure, and spatiotemporal dislocations that oblige the audience to leave their seats, to connect the dots, and, ultimately, to determine for themselves the meaning of each work. A complicated mélange of theatre, poetry, and narrative, Auxilio approaches 1968 through Roberto Bolaño’s novel Amuleto (Amulet; 1999), which is in turn based on the quasi-legendary story of poet-activist Alcira Soust Scaffo, who spent two weeks in a bathroom, starving and delirious, during the military occupation of the UNAM. An installation piece that runs on a 45-minute loop, El pasado nunca se muere leads the spectator through past, present, and future with photographs, drawings, pantomime, and a video that revolves around the members of the collective themselves and their failure to come to grips either politically or creatively with 1968.

Continuing with the independent nature and political thrust of the collective creations produced throughout Latin America during the tumultuous ’60s and ’70s, TeatroSinParedes and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol routinely tackle uncomfortable, unresolved aspects of Mexico’s political history and social reality with performance pieces that engage their audiences both physically and intellectually in the creative process.4 Like many collective groups, TeatroSinParedes and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol do not have a fixed performance space, but rather tend to perform in nonconventional spaces rife with politico-historical significance. Nonetheless, while both groups used the Plaza de Tlatelolco as a staging ground for these particular works, they do not dwell on the memories of 1968, attempt to recreate the events of that year, or repeat the time-worn slogans and demands for truth and justice, but rather focus on the present as a point from which to confront both the past and the future.5

Over the past 50 years, artists, historians, and other scholars have come to see the bloody conclusion of the student movement of 1968 as part of a historical continuum rather than a

3. What is now commonly referred to as “devised theatre” is known in Spanish as “creación colectiva.” This collaborative, nonhierarchical method of creating theatre proliferated during the ’60s and ’70s, when most Latin American countries were ruled by oppressive, authoritarian regimes. For more information, see Beatriz Rizk’s Creación colectiva: El legado de Enrique Buenaventura (2008). For recent examples of collective creation beyond Latin America, see Syssoyeva and Proudfoot (2013).

4. Mexican theatre collectives include TeatroSinParedes, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, Teatro Línea de Sombra, Vaca 35, Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes, and Teatro Ojo, among others. TeatroSinParedes was formed in Mexico City in 2001 and since then has produced nearly 25 works on a wide range of social, political, and cultural topics. Recent titles include Last Man Standing (2018), Goldpago (2018), Después de Babel (After Babel; 2017), and Los hambrientos (The Hungry Ones; 2017). Founded in 2003 in Mexico City, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol has produced works that shed new light on the narratives of official Mexican history, including: Derretiré con un cerillo la nieve de un volcán (I Will Melt with a Match the Snow of a Volcano; 2014), the history of the PRI and disappeared activist Natalia Valdez Tejeda; El rumor del incendio (The Sound of the Fire; 2012), the story of Luisa Pardo’s disappeared mother and Mexico’s “Dirty War”; Se rompen las olas (The Waves Break; 2013), on the birth of Lagartijas member Mariana Villegas and the 1985 earthquake; Está escrita en sus campos (It’s Written in Their Fields; 2013), on the history of drug trafficking; and three plays—Montserrat (2015), Veracruz, nos estamos deforestando (Veracruz, We’re Getting Deforested; 2016), and Elisa (2017)—on uninvestigated femicides. For more on Lagartijas, see Wård (2019).

5. These are not the first theatre collectives to tackle 1968 and Tlatelolco. As part of the 40th commemoration of 1968, Teatro Ojo presented a performance intervention titled ¡No! on key dates and in their corresponding public spaces (e.g., the Zócalo, where there had been a huge student protest on 27 August; and Tlatelolco on 2 October). In S.R.E. Visitas guiadas (S.R.E. Guided Visits; 2007), the same collective took spectators on a guided tour of the deserted and dilapidated building that formerly housed the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, from which Luis Echeverría purportedly oversaw the massacre. In 2006, it was granted to the UNAM and converted into the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, which now houses a permanent museum exhibit devoted to 1968.
unique, isolated moment in Mexican history. Susana Draper, for instance, describes 1968 not as a fixed moment in history, but rather as a constellation of “concepts, images, bodies, and memories that emerge as modes of continuing it in thought, in image, and in a distant present” (2018:x). More specifically, she sees the student movement of 1968 not as a demand for equality but for “the reconfiguration of the stage that makes the political possible,” a stage on which to “narrate the possibility of change, the historicity of the present in constant dialogue with the past” (2018:xiii). Although Draper does not include theatre in her study of the artistic and literary vehicles that have been used to reflect on and share the memory of 1968, her call for a “reconfiguration of the stage” is, in fact, highly relevant to the very literal stages on which Mexico’s theatre collectives are producing that same constellation of concepts, images, and bodies in performances that reconfigure 1968, play it forward, and foster a sense of agency. As Katherine Hite states in her book on politics and commemoration, remembrance is a passive act and the time has come “to transform the meanings of the past and mobilize the present” (2012:4).

Jacques Rancière’s description of critical art helps to explain the process used by artivists like TeatroSinParedes and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol to blur the boundary between those who act and those who look, to prompt critical thought, and to spur resistance:

Critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation. This schema, very simple in appearance, is actually the conjunction of three processes: first, the production of a sensory form of “strangeness”; second, the development of an awareness of the reason for that strangeness; and third, a mobilization of individuals as a result of that awareness. (2010:142)

In both of these performance pieces, the spectators, obliged by this purposeful “strangeness” to abandon their comfortable physical and political passivity, are moved to reflect on the legacy left to them by prior generations, on their own responsibility vis-à-vis the past, and on the need to think collectively about what a future Mexico could look like if they continue to do nothing to change the course of its history.

This call for historical consciousness and responsibility ties in with Walter Benjamin’s (1968) interpretation of Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus (1920) as a visual representation of our tendency to dwell obsessively on the worst of the past, which explains in turn our unwillingness or inability to confront the future. Although Benjamin, who once owned the artwork, wrote his famous essay “On the Concept of History” during the Holocaust, his interpretation of Angelus Novus is equally relevant to Mexico, where the Angel of History has been unable to turn its back on 2 October 1968. For the past five decades, the lack of transparency, truth, and justice that followed the massacre, coupled with a series of similarly violent events, have made it difficult for Mexicans to have faith in the possibility of a meaningful, lasting change in a country riddled with corruption. Indeed, as the years passed, the popular slogan “el dos de octubre no se olvida” (October 2nd is not forgotten) merely gained currency as the cycle of repression, bloodshed, and deception continued. As Draper observes, 1968 is not an isolated event but rather “traverses Mexican history to the rhythm of mobilization and to the constant of state repression” (2018:193). Most remarkable in this chain of events is the murky disappearance of 43 students in rural Ayotzinapa on 26 September 2014, which added significantly to that growing pile of debris that keeps the Angel of History from turning its eyes toward the future.6 If the Angel were to do so, the future

6. In a case of tragic irony, those 43 students would still be alive today if it were not for the massacre of 1968. On their way to Mexico City to commemorate October 2nd, the buses they had commandeered for their annual road trip were intercepted by armed forces, who then, with the alleged help of a local group of narcos, disappeared the students. It is widely believed that the 43 who disappeared were unwittingly riding on a bus filled with drugs. For detailed information on the events in Ayotzinapa and the impunity and cover-ups that followed, see Gibler (2017).
it would see, as envisioned and enacted by these two collectives, is as yet dark, senseless, and shrouded in fog.

**Auxilio: Au secours**

*Auxilio: Au secours* is the product of a 2018 collaboration between TeatroSinParedes and the French group Théâtre 2 l’Acte. The participation of European actors, directors, and scriptwriters in this collective effort extends both the performance of the work and its context beyond the borders of Mexico, reminding the audience that the rebellions of 1968 were not unique to Mexico but rather a global phenomenon that spread throughout Europe and other parts of the world. Indeed, the name TeatroSinParedes signals from the start the group’s eschewal of geographic as well as artistic boundaries.

*Auxilio* consists of three discrete parts: “El cagadero” (The Shitter); “La púa de la biznaga” (The Prickle on the Cactus); and “Fragments del amuleto roto” (Fragments of the Broken Amulet). One of the site-specific performances of this piece took place in the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco (CCUT), which overlooks the Plaza de Tlatelolco and formerly housed the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. It was from here that the president’s successor, Luis Echeverría, purportedly oversaw the slaughter of students, supporters, and bystanders. Each part is set in a different year — 1968, 2018, and 2068 — and in a different area of the CCUT. Furthermore, each is the product of a different pairing of dramaturg and director: Serge Pey and Michel Mathieu; Sergio Felipe López Vigueras and David Psalmon; and Ángel Hernández and Sébastien Lange, respectively.

The mixture of narrative, verse, and spectacle, the use of three different performance spaces, the unchronological presentation of events over three time periods, and the insertion of graphic images and acts of violence and depravation combine to produce and maintain a sense of discomfort and disorientation in the spectator. The audience of *Auxilio* is provoked to participate — liberated from their armchair passivity — not only by the constant stream of disparate verbal,

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7. My description of *Auxilio* is based on the performance that I saw on 13 November 2018 in the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco. The piece premiered at the end of October 2018 at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional, site of some of the most violent confrontations between students and government forces. After the staging in Tlatelolco, *Auxilio* played in the Foro Experimental José Luis Ibáñez of the UNAM. While all three sites are commonly associated with 1968, autonomy, and youthful rebellion, each spatial configuration, from outdoor esplanade to indoor forum, most likely produced a different response in the audience. While the group generously shared with me the three parts of the script, these texts contain only the verbal discourse.
visual, and auditory images, but also by the actors’ express demands that the spectators move, literally, from one physical space to another.

As Rancière explains, this process of emancipation begins when the spectator is “shown a strange, unusual spectacle, a mystery whose meaning he must seek out. He will thus be compelled to exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter, who observes phenomena and searches for their causes” (2008:4). In Auxilio, this “strange, unusual spectacle” commences with what might loosely be termed a prologue, which takes place “offstage” in the lobby and sets up the subsequent spectator/performer interaction. While the 20 or so spectators stand waiting to move into what appears to be the performance space, several disheveled people draw uncomfortably close and stare at them blankly. I, for one, found it impossible to escape the relentless, penetrating stare of these seeming vagrants. Only when we were finally led outside and instructed to sit on a set of cold stone steps did I realize that these ragged, expressionless figures were part of the cast. Indeed, during this first part of the performance, they serve as both a chorus to the monologue delivered by the protagonist, Auxilio, and as the ghosts of those who fell in the Plaza de Tlatelolco. “El cagadero” was in fact performed within sight of the Edificio Chihuahua, from which the student leaders were addressing a crowd of several thousand on a similarly cold, dark evening when the massacre of 2 October began.

Those familiar with the work of Bolaño will recognize Auxilio as one of the characters in Los detectives salvajes (The Savage Detectives; 1998) and 2666 (2006) and as the protagonist of Amuleto. Somewhat of an urban legend, little is known for certain about this woman other than that her real name is not the one used by Bolaño — Auxilio Lacouture — but rather Alcira Soust Scaffo. An undocumented Uruguayan woman who did cleaning for a couple of Spanish exile poets as well as odd jobs in the Humanities offices of the UNAM, Alcira is said to have been a poet herself and an ardent supporter of Mexico’s young poets, many of them students at the same university. Among these was that nena Bolaño, who had just arrived from Chile with his family that same year of 1968. When military troops entered and occupied the enormous campus of the UNAM on 18 September and arrested a large number of students and professors, Auxilio/Alcira was in a bathroom, where she remained hidden until the troops vacated the campus on 1 October. Throughout the occupation, she survived spiritually on a book of poetry and physically on toilet paper and tap water. She reportedly remained in Mexico until 1988, when she returned to Uruguay, where she died in 1997. As more details of her years in Mexico have come to light, Alcira Soust Scaffo has emerged as a local hero — a courageous, albeit eccentric, free spirit.8

The only items that accompany Auxilio on the small outdoor performance area are a toilet, streams of toilet paper, several white screens on which she smears black and red paint, and the aforementioned “zombies,” who intervene from time to time with fragments of free verse. Verse is, in fact, the only form of discourse used in this part of the performance. This is not surprising, however, as poetry was the sustenance of Auxilio’s life both before and during the occupation. It was also the literary form favored by Bolaño during his youth. While known primarily for his

8. This is not the first dramatic work to treat the subject of Auxilio/Alcira. In 2008, Antonio Algarra staged in the Teatro La Capilla the solo show Alcira o la poesía en armas (Alcira Or Poetry Up in Arms), in which the role of Alcira was played by Verónica Langer. In a review of this play, Bruno Bert recognizes the importance of Auxilio/Alcira as a symbol of resistance (2008). There has been growing interest in Alcira over the years, particularly after Bolaño’s publication of Amuleto. As part of the Memorial 68 of 2018, the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) devoted an entire exhibit to her, “Escribir poesía, ¿vivir dónde?” (To Write Poetry, Where to Live?), while the Festival Vértice, an annual experimental theatre festival also organized by the UNAM, simultaneously staged Luciérnaga (Firefly), a multimedia opera based on the experiences of Alcira during the military occupation of the UNAM (written by Silvia Peláez). There is also a Facebook page dedicated to Alcira Soust Scaffo.
narrative works, Bolaño was a prolific poet. The terse, crude poetry uttered by Auxilio and her phantasmal chorus is remarkably similar to the *infrarrealista*, or virtual realist poetry, that the young Bolaño and his fellow poets were creating in Mexico during the ’60s and ’70s. As Roberto Ontiveros explains, “Bolaño was a poet first. At 23, wild-haired and wearing aviator goggles, he read from his manifesto, *Leave It All Again*, which challenged poets to take to the road [...] and engage in actual encounter, inaugurating the dada-inspired movement Infrarealism” (2007). The Infrarealists were known for putting poetry before all else, breaking with literary conventions, laying waste to high culture, and maintaining a blatant disregard for officialdom. As an ally and guardian of Mexico’s starving young vanguardist poets, Auxilio relies on verse not only as a means of survival, but also as the means of expressing her disdain for authority.

The central metaphor in Auxilio and the chorus’s poetic recitations is the toilet, which at once represents “un labio blanco” (a white lip), a mouth into which Auxilio shits and from which poetry flows forth, the dark hole into which the shit of history is flushed, and the image of those killed: “Mi camarada que murió en Tlatelolco / se ha convertido en un cagadero” (My comrade who died in Tlatelolco / has turned into a shithole).9 In fact, there is little that Auxilio does not relate in one way or another to the toilet and defecation. Beyond its figurative multivalence, the “cagadero” serves Auxilio as a temporal and spatial anchor during her captivity:

Hace 11 días ya que estoy en el cagadero
lo único que hago es orinar
Como no como nada
ya no cago
Voy a quedarme en este cagadero
durante siglos.

(I’ve already been in this shithole for 11 days
the only thing I do is pee
Since I don’t eat anything
I no longer shit
I’m going to stay in this shithouse
for centuries.)

The fusion of the poetic and the scatological, metaphor and *mierda*, continues throughout this part of the performance as Auxilio establishes the importance of poetry not only in terms of her own survival but also that of humankind. As she insists, “Tenemos que inventar un poema nuevo para inventar un hombre nuevo” (We have to invent a new poem in order to invent a new man).

After several minutes of smearing paint on the panels and monotonously “shitting” lines of verse, Auxilio suddenly stops speaking. Lacking any indication that this part of the performance has ended, the audience sits there in the darkness, cold and confused, as several men in long raincoats wander nearby with buckets and sticks. As they dig at the ground, their barely audible words, “rascar hasta encontrar algo” (scrape until we find something), suggest a search for the remains of something and at the same time presage the disappearance that will take place in the next part of the performance. In an unspoken invitation to join in the search, these men offer buckets to a few of the spectators and then wordlessly lead the group back into the building. A sense of community is created as the 20 or so spectators are silently shuffled from one dark performance space to the next, forced to rely on one another as they struggle to understand where they should be and what they should do once they get there. In his study of contemporary performance art, José A. Sánchez notes how a collective “we” forms as the attention of the spectators is drawn by the sheer theatricality of what they are seeing:

9. All translations are mine. The scripts for both performances under discussion remain unpublished.
[A] través de distintas formas de interlocución apelan a la noción de teatralidad y [...] describen o construyen paisajes que nos invitan a mirar. Un mirar basado en la potencialidad de la acción reflexiva, que pone de manifiesto la importancia de entender y erigir el “nosotros.” (2015:15)

(By way of different forms of interlocution they appeal to the notion of theatricality and [...] describe or construct landscapes that invite us to look. A look based on the power of reflexive action, a look that manifests the importance of understanding and building the “we.”)

The “we” to which Sánchez refers is that unique sense of community created by and in the theatre, which, as Rancière notes, “remains the only place where the audience confronts itself as a collective” (2008:5). There are no verbal exchanges among actors and spectators, which means that the only thing the latter can do is to look, as they strive to make meaning of what they are seeing. This collective, reflexive looking continues into the second part of the play as the spectators silently follow these cloaked, ominous-looking men back into the lobby of the CCUT.

“La púa de la biznaga” consists of two scenes presented in reverse chronological order, both involving a young poet and activist named Bernardo. While no reference is made to Auxilio in this part, the presence of the toilet center stage maintains the link with “El cagadero.” A man stands on one side behind a long table lined with instruments associated with torture. A group of actors dressed in identical military uniforms, latex gloves, and large dark glasses stands on a platform that runs along the back wall. Characterized collectively in the script as “Objetivo” (Objective), this chorus of ominous figures tersely describes the methods of torture.

Figure 3. Alex Moreu plays Bernardo’s torturer in “La púa de la biznaga.” Auxilio: Au secours. Directed by David Psalmon. Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, Mexico City, 13 November 2018. (Photo by Jacqueline Bixler)
that have been used on Bernardo, while the latter, disheveled, bruised, and stripped of all
but his underwear, narrates his own torture in the past tense and another voice identified as
“Conciencia” (Conscience) repeats words such as ¿Cuánto tiempo? (How long?) and “Vueltas”
(Again and again) to convey the extent and intensity of the torture:

BERNARDO: Alzaste la mirada.

TORTURADOR: ¿No me vas a decir tu nombre Bernardo?

OBJETIVO: Muy despacio [...]

BERNARDO: Uno de ellos abría una lata grande de chiles.

TORTURADOR: ¿No me vas a decir los nombres del francés o de la maestra?

BERNARDO: Viste cómo hundió la macana en la lata de chiles.

CONCIENCIA: ¿Cuánto tiempo?

BERNARDO: Revolvió lentamente.

OBJETIVO: Con delicadeza.

(BERNARDO: You looked up.

TORTURER: Aren’t you going to tell me your name, Bernardo?

OBJECTIVE: Very slowly [...]

BERNARDO: One of them was opening a big can of chili peppers.
TORTURER: Aren’t you going to tell me the names of the French man or the teacher?
BERNARDO: You saw how he plunged the rod into the can of chilies.
CONSCIENCE: For how long?
BERNARDO: He stirred slowly.
OBJECTIVE: Gently.)

The only line delivered with any tone at all is the chilling and incongruous “Con delicadeza” (“Gently”), repeated throughout by the chorus of uniformed agents in a melodious voice that makes the torture, and what appears to be the perpetrators’ attempt to trivialize or eroticize it, all the more disturbing.

After serving as witness to Bernardo’s physical pain and to the excruciatingly detailed account of his torture, the audience is directed to a sunken cove of the lobby, set with considerable realism to serve as the living room, dining room, and kitchen of a middle-class home. The spectators are immediately confused at the sight of Bernardo, which suggests that this scene actually took place before the preceding one. Even more unsettling is the presence of several laptops, which leads to the realization that the torture scene did not take place in 1968 but rather in present-day Mexico. The shift to the present is further evidenced in the names of the characters, which correspond to those of the actors, including director David Psalmon in the role of the French professor who has come to the UNAM to impart a seminar on 1968 and whose students include Bernardo.

Like modern-day Auxilios, David’s students view poetry as a means of expressing and sowing discord. While all are gathered for a meal, one of the students hacks into the public announcement system and broadcasts one of Bernardo’s dissident poems. Their celebration of this small but significant act of rebellion ends abruptly when the communiqué goes viral and they comprehend the danger of being apprehended. As the scene ends, they hastily pack up their laptops and depart, except for Bernardo, who stays behind to wipe the desktop computer and, as the audience now knows, to be arrested and tortured.

The third part of Auxilio, “Fragmentos del amuleto roto,” is the one most grounded in the work of Bolaño and at the same time the most difficult to unpack. The only temporal clue is a timeline extended on the floor of the lobby, which the spectators may or may not have noticed, and which indicates that this part of the performance is set in 2068.10 Performed in a large, black cube, the toilet and stall stand center stage, where Auxilio alternately sits and stands to address the audience, while the right-hand side is occupied by musicians who intermittently play loud rock music. The chorus, previously dressed as zombies and military police, now consists of a group of girls, identically dressed in school uniforms, white knee-high socks, and bobbed, platinum-colored wigs.

The text of “Fragmentos del amuleto roto” includes five short fragments, each of which echoes Bolaño in the use of terse, metaphorical language and the narration of hypothetical encounters between Auxilio and others, either real or imagined. The title of this part refers to both his novel, Amuleto, and the traumatic memories of Tlatelolco, or what Auxilio calls the fragments of an amulet that “desde 1968, no han dejado de sonar” (haven’t stopped rattling since 1968). The first fragment, “Decálogo” (Decalogue), is a manifesto in defense of poetry. With a chain of similes, each beginning with “Creo en la poesía como” (I believe in poetry as), Auxilio forces associations between poetry and such things as rebellion, the intimacy of a toilet stall, and the indelible trace left by former generations. In one, for example, she describes

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10. This rather inconspicuous timeline constitutes the only direct reference to 2068. Following the performance, several fellow spectators said that they had failed to see it and as a result were utterly confused as to the temporal setting and purpose of the third and final part of the performance.
poetry as “un cuartel clandestino para acumular miradas, como una convocatoria anónima de la memoria compartida” (a dark, secret storehouse of visual images, an anonymous collection of shared memories). In this instance, the “cuartel clandestino” aptly describes the large dark room in which the spectators look at painful images and silently share anxious, uncomfortable looks (miradas) with the strangers who sit by their side.

The next fragment, “Itinerarios” (Itineraries), offers yet another set of short passages, each introduced by a phrase that identifies the speaker and what he or she is doing while speaking, such as “Dos hombres mirando desde la acera contraria” (Two men watching from the opposite sidewalk) and “Militar encendiendo un cigarrillo” (Soldier lighting a cigarette). Various voices narrate in almost telegraphic style the tense, polarized atmosphere that reigned during and after the summer of 1968, whereas the voices heard during the next fragment, “Esquema de pensamiento simultáneo” (Outline of Simultaneous Thinking), refer specifically to Bolaño’s Amuleto and what little is known about Auxilio/Alcira’s personal life. Speaking at particular moments during her absence, the actors narrate the thoughts of those who knew Auxilio and who, unaware of her predicament, resented her absence; Bolaño, for one, is worried about getting back the books he lent her, while exiled Spanish poet León Felipe wishes she would come back and clean his study.

The fourth fragment, “Presentación con vida de aquella tarde” (Live Presentation of That Afternoon), again centers on Auxilio, who, starving and delirious, loses all notion of time and reflects on a distant future:

Imaginamos caminar Tlatelolco cincuenta años después y la ciudad no era muy distinta nada había cambiado demasiado.

(We imagined walking around Tlatelolco fifty years later and the city wasn’t very different nothing had changed very much.)

This projection into the future leads to the final fragment, “Elena lee la mano de Auxilio” (Elena Reads Auxilio’s Palm), wherein Elena (presumably Elena Poniatowska) and Auxilio alternately speak of the sameness that followed the massacre of 2 October.11 By the following morn-

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11. While it is unlikely that Poniatowska and Soust Scaffo ever met one another, the latter does appear in La noche de Tlatelolco (The Night of Tlatelolco) through the voice of Carolina Pérez Cicero, who describes Alcira hiding in the bathroom during the 1968 university occupation (Poniatowska 1971:71).
ing, the blood had been washed away, the abandoned shoes had been removed, and life went on as usual in the metropolis. Her observation that nothing much had changed extends beyond the streets on 3 October to the cycle of rebellion and massacre that has been repeated, albeit on a smaller scale, not only in the capital but in places with less familiar names like Acteal, Aguas Blancas, El Charco, Tánhuato, Nochixtlán, Iguala, and Tlatlaya.

While this description of “Fragmentos del amuleto roto” suggests that the discourse used in these five fragments is strictly verbal, the performance includes a relentless visual and auditory assault on the spectator. The words of Auxilio and others are uttered to a backdrop of videos, projected images, writhing bodies, strobe lights, and deafening rock music. What these jarring, incongruous images of leather-clad musicians, platinum-haired Lolitas, and bodies wrapped in toilet paper might suggest regarding the future, however, remains unclear. Rather than an answer or even an ending, the final words uttered by those onstage merely offer another beginning:

ELENA: Ahora ellos han abierto la puerta.

AUXILIO: Sí, la han abierto. Y ahora es esto lo que encontrarán aquí [...].

(ELENA: Now they’ve opened the door.

AUXILIO: Yes, they’ve opened it. And now this is what they’ll find here [...].)

Presumably, what lies behind the door are those fragmented bits of amulet that, according to Auxilio, replicate in an endless cycle: “desde 1968, no han dejado de sonar dentro del mismo, interminable poema que antes de morir, vuelve a comenzar siempre, otra vez” (since 1968, they haven’t stopped rattling around in the same, interminable poem that, before dying, always starts up again).

Following this inconclusive conclusion, the spectators are led back to the outdoor esplanade where it all started. Two small tents invite them to enter and leave written or oral comments, to be sealed in a time capsule and opened in 2068. They are also invited to discuss the performance while they partake of the soup that Bernardo’s mother was preparing during the second half of “La púa de la biznaga.” While the spectators may disagree in their interpretation of what they just witnessed, an undeniable collective bond has been formed and we are left to determine not only the meaning of the play but also the direction of Mexico’s future.

While the three parts of Auxilio differ from one another in spatial and temporal terms, they are bound together by the lingering image of Auxilio, by the works of Bolaño, by poetry as both a theme and a mode of discourse, by the toilet that sits center stage, and by the denunciatory tone that rings throughout. From Bolaño to Auxilio to Bernardo, the audience is reminded that power resides in the individual and his/her active resistance to oppression, which in this performance piece is expressed primarily through poetry. As Auxilio states, “La poesía es un trabajo revolucionario / como la revolución es un trabajo de poesía” (Poetry is revolutionary work / just like the revolution is a work of poetry). Later in the play, Bernardo similarly suggests that the answer to the future lies in creative expression, of which poetry and Auxilio itself serve as examples:

Tenemos que invadir la vida de poesía, de belleza, de arte. Así podremos incidir en la vida cotidiana a largo plazo y generar un cambio profundo, derivado de escuchar, diariamente y en distintos momentos, algo que no debería estar ahí: es la flor que crece en la grieta en el concreto.

(We have to invade life with poetry, beauty, art. That will allow us to have a long-term impact on daily life and to generate a profound change, which comes from listening, on a daily basis and at different moments, to something that shouldn’t be there: it’s the flower that grows out of the crack in the concrete.)
Bolaño and his fellow Infrarealists were followers of Italian poet, playwright, and director Pier Paolo Pasolini, who believed in poetry as a form of action that was at once aesthetically beautiful and politically committed. As Sánchez explains:

Lo que Pasolini propuso es que la poesía sea acción y que la acción sea poesía. Y esto no implica renunciar a la invención poética sino más bien todo lo contrario, afirmar la invención poética en un compromiso con la acción. [...] Él se mantuvo en una tensión fuerte [...] entre la defensa de la poesía, la defensa del arte [...] y el reconocimiento de una realidad social y política implacable y gris que demandaba respuestas. (2015:37)

(What Pasolini proposed was that poetry be action and that action be poetry. And this does not mean renouncing poetic invention, but rather the opposite: to affirm poetic creation in a commitment to action. [...] He maintained a strong tension [...] between the defense of poetry, the defense of art [...] and the recognition of an implacable, gray, social and political reality that demanded answers.)

Like Pasolini and Bolaño, the characters of Auxilio advocate the use of figurative language to say the unsayable and to resignify the timeworn:

BERNARDO: Eso es [...] Poesía. Palabras que digan lo otro.

BEATRIZ: Es Arte: resignificar medios y mensajes.

(BERNARDO: That’s it [...] Poetry. Words that say something else.

BEATRIZ: That’s Art: resignifying means and messages.)

Bernardo’s image of the flower growing out of a crack in the concrete reflects the vanguardist hope that art can effect change. Furthermore, it functions as what Rancière terms a “pensive image” by “signal[ing] the existence of a zone of indeterminacy between [...] art and non-art” (2008:102). More specifically, it captures the tension between aesthetics and politics, the marvelous and the mundane, action and passivity, a tension that runs not only throughout the performance, but continues long after it ends. The title of this piece is, after all, not simply the name of the protagonist; more importantly, auxilio, like the French au secour, is a cry for help in putting an end to the sameness that has reigned in Mexico since 1968.

El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado

Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol’s performance installation likewise bears the weight of the past, but focuses more on the current generation’s fear of the future and their resultant inability to look ahead. Members of the collective openly share their personal fears of history repeating itself, of Mexico never moving forward, and of their own creative failures. While the performance of Auxilio extends over two hours, El pasado nunca se muere lasts only 45 minutes and is designed to run on a continuous loop for several hours each day. On a practical level, this (re)cycling of the performance responds to the logistical need to limit the number of spectators to 20, while the reperformance of past, present, and future underscores the repetition of history itself, particularly that of Tlatelolco, a site associated since the days of the Aztecs with an endless cycle of oppression, blood, and sacrifice.

Like Auxilio, El pasado includes several moving pieces that relate to different epochs and locations. The three main components — printed materials, live pantomime, and video —

12. El pasado nunca se muere was first presented in May 2018 as part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts held in Brussels to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the student uprisings that began in Europe and spread like wildfire to Mexico and other parts of the world. Later that year, on 8–9 December, the work was performed, like Auxilio, in the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco. My analysis of the piece is based on materials provided by the group: a 12-minute video; photos of the performance; the handbill; and a 90-second video comprised of documentary clips.
Performing Tlatelolco roughly correspond to the years 1968, 2018, and 2048 and take place, respectively, in a viewing gallery, a small empty performance space, and a projection room. Each part requires the spectators to move from one space to the next. Commenting on 21st-century Mexican performance art, Rubén Ortiz employs the term “arqueología de la mirada” (archeology of the look) to describe the role of the spectator in these guided tours of a staged “reality”:

Los actores no se ofrecen como personajes al servicio de una línea narrativa, sino como interventores en una secuencia escénica. [...] Los propios espectadores pueden volverse los conductores del acontecimiento mientras los actores funcionan únicamente como guías del flujo del evento” (2011:314).

(The actors don’t offer to serve as characters in a narrative, but rather as interveners in a scenic sequence. [...] The spectators themselves can become the conductors of the event while the actors function only as guides in maintaining the flow of the event.)

They create that liberating “strangeness” through their limited presence and participation in the performance and also through the disparate visual exhibits (photos, story boards, videos, etc.) that the audience is invited to look at. Instead of a coherent narrative, the spectators, like viewers of pictures at an exhibition, see only a chain of isolated images that they must piece together if any sense is to be made of the whole.

The spectators participate actively in the performance as what Antonio Prieto Stambaugh terms “espectandantes, cuyo caminar, presencias y testimonios forman parte del discurso escénico” (2018:131) (walking spectators whose walking, presence, and testimonies form part of the scenic discourse). Rather than sit and passively observe, or be shuffled around by the silent guards of Auxilio, the spectators of El pasado nunca se muere take control of the performance, moving at their own pace through the three spaces, interacting with the various parts of the installation, and engaging at leisure with their past, present, and future histories. Indeed, there is only one segment during which the actors communicate directly, albeit silently, with the spectators, who sit in a circle on the floor while two of the actors pantomime what the audience has just seen in a video.

According to the group’s founders, Luisa Pardo and Gabino Rodríguez, this work originated in the disheartening dissolution of the #YoSoy132 movement (I am number 132), which arose in 2012 and imitated in many ways that of the 1968 student movement: protests, mass marches, and demands for true democracy and freedom of expression.13 While #YoSoy132 did not end with a massacre of hundreds, it led to the same widespread destruction.

13. #YoSoy132 was a protest movement initiated by Mexican university students following the visit of presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto to the Universidad Iberoamericana on 11 May 2012. His response to a question about the 2006 massacre of rural protesters, which he had ordered as governor of the State of Mexico, incensed students to the point that the candidate had to be led out a back passageway. Later, when a video of the event...
sense of disillusionment and hopelessness, particularly among the young. As the members of Lagartijas explain in an interview, they themselves felt a keen need to escape 1968:

LUISA: [The work] originated in the sense of defeat that stayed with us after we participated in the #YoSoy132 movement of 2012. It was a mass movement. We felt like we were making History with a capital H.

FRANCISCO: But our movement very quickly started to replicate that of 1968: we shouted the same slogans, we marched in the same way to the same places.

LUISA: It was weird. It seemed like we could only represent ourselves in relation to ’68.

In *A Shared Truth: The Theater of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol*, Julie Ann Ward notes that the members of the group “explicitly ask about the responsibilities of a generation to uphold the revolutionary values of the ones that came before” (2019:15). While researching the guerrilla movement of the ’70s for *Rebeldía* (Rebellion), their 2010 project, Lagartijas recognized the need to understand the values of the previous generation, which meant tackling 1968, Tlatelolco, and the unfulfilled dreams of the student movement. They also realized, however,
that they had to find a different way to settle the score with 1968, for any effort to duplicate it, whether on the stage or in the streets, would merely lead to the farce that, according to Karl Marx (1852), results from any attempt to re-enact a tragedy.

With this need in mind, and buoyed by the #Yosoy132 movement of 2012, Lagartijas decided to make a movie that would lead to a different way of thinking, acting, and living, a movie that would communicate their belief that “lo que se puede actuar se puede pensar y, eventualmente, se puede vivir” (2018b:54) (what can be acted can be thought and, eventually, can be lived). Unfortunately, for reasons they never fully disclose, the project failed. Consequently, what the audience sees projected on the screen is not the intended movie, but merely a short video in which the members recollect this aborted endeavor. They do not speak from the year 2018, however, but rather from 2048. The video shows the aged, would-be cinematographers leading peaceful yet seemingly purposeless lives and ends with the still image of a fog-shrouded desk chair. Ultimately, from the audience’s standpoint in 2018, this 2048 movie serves as a reminder of the current creative and political void in which they, the audience, live and will continue to live unless they find a way to overcome the fear that stymies creativity and critical thought: the fear of failure.

While Auxilio moves chronologically from 1968 to 2068, El pasado nunca se muere establishes 2048 as the present and takes the audience back to a “past” that is 2018. Before the performance begins, members of the audience receive a lengthy handbill. The first part of this text refers to 2018 in the past tense—“la impunidad en el país se había vuelto escandalosa y no parecía que hubiera ningún proyecto de transformación ‘real’ en el horizonte” (impunity in Mexico had reached a scandalous level and it didn’t seem like there was any project for “real” transformation on the horizon)—and then to the “present” year of 2048, in which three members of the group recall their failed attempt to make the movie:

La película “El pasado nunca se muere, ni siquiera es pasado” fue un proyecto que se intentó realizar en 2018. Ese año se cumplían 50 años del movimiento de 1968 y había una inquietud grande por pensar esa herencia. La película se insertaba dentro de esa coyuntura, pero no se realizó [...] Hoy, en mayo de 2048, a 30 años de distancia, queremos recordar esa película que no se acabó de lograr. (Lagartijas 2018a)

(The movie “The Past Is Never Dead, It’s Not Even Past” was a project that we tried to do in 2018. It was the 50th anniversary of the movement of 1968 and there was an anxious need to think about that legacy. The movie was going to insert itself in that conjunction, but it never got made [...] Today, in May 2048, 30 years later, we want to remember that movie that never got finished.)

With this background information in mind and uncertain of what the future, both near and distant, may hold, the audience itself activates the installation upon entering a gallery containing various audiovisual materials. A 90-second video projects a collage of scenes of dissent and repression from 1968, 2012, and 2018. The fact that the clips do not indicate the years in which they were filmed signals the unchanging, cyclical nature of recent Mexican history; other than the graininess of some of the clips, it is nearly impossible to distinguish the scenes of one year from those of another. The walls of the gallery include collages of 1968 newspaper clippings as well as storyboards from the movie that the group failed to make in 2018.

While the spectators peruse these items, a neon sign with the words “Al cruzar esta puerta entrarás al año 2048” (Upon crossing this threshold you will enter the year 2048) invites them to enter another space and watch the 12-minute retrospective video purportedly made by the group that same year. It begins with a scene from 2018, wherein a group of workers removes a large stone outline of the number 1968 from a hillside, as if removing 1968 from public history/memory. The video then cuts to Luisa Pardo, who relates how the group, like Klee’s/Benjamin’s Angel of History, found themselves unable to break free of the past:
Somos conscientes del valor de lo que hicieron, 
de lo que les debemos, que no es poco. 
Crecimos admirando su odisea. 
Los hemos escuchado decir que la libertad no se olvida nunca. 
Que la vida fue más vida en sus tiempos. 
No nos quedó más que creerles. 
Pero hay verdades que dejan de servir, 
que se vuelven una pesada carga, una que no nos deja ser libres. 
Hemos tratado de hacer movimientos como el suyo y no hemos podido, 
[...] 
Hemos querido llegar siendo quienes no somos. 
Sabemos que hasta que no se muera el último participante del 68 no vamos a ser libres. 
Y se nos está acabando la paciencia, así que si no se van muriendo [...] los iremos matando. 
(Lagartijas 2018a)

(We are conscious of the value of what they did, 
of what we owe them, which is not negligible. 
We grew up admiring their odyssey. 
We’ve heard them say that liberty is never forgotten. 
That life was more lively during their time. 
We could do nothing but believe them. 
But there are truths that stop working, 
that become a heavy burden, a burden that doesn’t allow us to be free. 
We’ve tried to create movements like theirs and we’ve failed, 
[...] 
We’ve tried to get there being those that we are not. 
We know that we will not be free until the last participant in ’68 dies. 
And we’re running out of patience, so if they don’t start dying [...] we’ll start killing them.)

Following this chilling monologue, the video camera moves among the aforementioned group members, who, 30 years later and in different locations—La Plaza de Tlatelolco, the UNAM, and an unidentified wooded area—remember their failed effort to make the movie. Rather than speak aloud, Luisa, Gabino, and Francisco (Paco), now portrayed by older actors, share their thoughts by “writing” in the air with their fingers, which are covered with small patches, while a voiceover conveys their words to the audience, seemingly a futuristic way to communicate. The scenes set in 2048 are enacted by the parents of Gabino and Paco, while an older actress plays the part of Luisa. The present of the parents, who were real-life 1968 activists, is the year 2048, in which they represent the future of their real-life children.

Following these “interviews,” the video camera enters a dilapidated house, which slowly fills with fog as the camera ascends a dust-covered staircase before ending with the image of an abandoned desk chair. Fog, as Ward notes, is often used by Lagartijas to “represent a lack of clarity or transparency in official matters” (2019:113), while the empty writing chair suggests a text that was never written, or perhaps simply abandoned like their film. Afterwards, the audience sits on the floor and watches as two members of the group silently “narrate” some of the same scenes from the video, using only their bodies and a chair. The spectators then return through the portal to the year 2018, at which point the installation ends.

In the final analysis, El pasado nunca se muere is not simply a work about a failed film project, but rather a reflection of Lagartijas’s persistent questioning of their own position and potentiality vis-à-vis the past, which they expressed in their 2010 La Rebeldía:

¿Puede una mirada crítica al pasado transformar el futuro? [...] ¿Qué es la rebeldía en el siglo XXI? ¿Cómo se configura la disidencia hoy? ¿Cómo se construye un mejor país? [...] ¿Enmendar un error del pasado podría ser una llave para el futuro? ¿Cómo recuperamos la esperanza? (Lagartijas 2010:10)
Performing Tlatelolco

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(Can a critical look at the past transform the future? [...] What does rebellion consist of in the 20th century? What does dissent look like today? How does a better country get built? [...] Could the correction of a past error be a key to the future? How do we regain hope?)

While the group members clearly do not have the answers to these questions, they recognize the need for projects that will inspire hope rather than further disillusion:

[A]bsolutamente conscientes de las diferencias que nos separan del México de los 60s y 70s, nos sentimos inmersos en una profunda desazón. Enfermos. En un país en el que nos hemos vuelto insensibles a la desigualdad y tal vez incapaces de configurar proyectos políticos portadores de esperanza. (12)

(Absolutely conscious of the differences that separate us from the Mexico of the '60s and '70s, we feel immersed in the same discomfort. Sick. In a country in which we have become insensitive to inequality and perhaps incapable of creating political projects that will bring hope.)

This sentiment sheds light on that chilling moment in the video when Luisa declares the need to kill anyone who survived Tlatelolco in order to move on from this past “que ni siquiera es pasado,” a statement eerily similar to that made by Auxilio when she commands the audience to rematar (kill once and for all) the dead of Tlatelolco: “Si están muertos / desentiérrenlos / También hay que saber/ fusilar a los muertos” (2018a) (If they are dead / dig up their bodies / One also needs to know / how to shoot the dead). Ultimately, as Draper explains, Mexico’s current generation needs to stop counting the dead of Tlatelolco and “configure a memory [of 1968] that elicits forms of pleasure, collective empowerment, and disappointment instead of trauma” (2018:3).

Conclusions or the Need Thereof

El pasado nunca se muere is a narrative about a failed artistic performance, but beyond that and more importantly it is about failed political performances, particularly the failure of the 1968 student movement and offshoots like #YoSoy132 to change the course of Mexico’s history.

Auxilio likewise involves the failure to produce change, be it through poetry or through more active forms of resistance. The torture of Bernardo is not only evidence of that failure but also a terrifying reminder that the powers that be continue to remove from the national stage those who resist. Both works “emancipate” their spectators by pushing them out of their passive zone, be it through a forced march from one performance space to another, through shockingly crude images, or through a video filmed in the distant future. As Beatriz, one of Bernardo’s coconspirators in Auxilio, states: “[S]e contagia la necesidad de pasar a la acción. Es como si esos jóvenes de la marcha del silencio voltearan a vernos, desde el 68, y nos preguntaran: ¿Y tú? ¿Qué estás haciendo tú?” (The need to take action is contagious. It’s as if those young people in the silent march turned to look at us, from the year 1968, and asked us: And you? What are you doing?)
In both pieces, the question is directed at the audience: Can your generation move forward, shake off the apathy produced by repeated frustration and disillusion, and collectively forge a future that isn’t merely a repetition of the past?

What makes these two pieces “theatrical” is, of course, the presence of the spectators, who are asked to perform in the making of meaning and also in the creation of a promising political project. TeatroSinParedes asks the spectator to collaborate in small ways, such as the invitation to take a bucket and help scratch the dirt for remains and the request that the audience contribute written or verbal comments for a time capsule. Lagartijas lures their espectandantes through a portal to the year 2048 and a baffling video about a movie that was never made and then leaves them to connect the dots among the various forms of expression and configurations of time and space.

In these two pieces, the past is portrayed as a weight on the present and an obstacle to a different, perhaps better future. The activists who created them are openly critical of those who ignore the past in favor of a comfortable, carefree life and also of those who simply study the past but do nothing to move forward. As French-born UNAM professor David declares in the first play:

Yo mismo no entiendo. No acabo de entender este país. Llevo más de veinte años estudiándolo. Cuando nació el ejército zapatista, tuve que voltear para acá. ¿Qué chingados estaba pasando? La rebelión indígena [...] Luego fue Chenalhó, el EPR, Atenco, la APPO, la Otra Campaña, el 132, Ayotzinapa [...] Una y otra vez, parecía que ahora sí iba a haber un despertar masivo [...] Y nada.

(I myself don’t understand. I’ll never understand this country. I’ve been studying it for more than 20 years. When the Zapatista army formed, I had to turn and look this way. What the fuck was happening? The indigenous uprising [...] Then it was Chenalhó, the EPR, Atenco, la APPO, the Other Campaign, 132, Ayotzinapa [...] Time and time again, it seemed like the masses were going to awaken [...] And nothing.)

By presenting 1968 as part of a historical continuum, TeatroSinParedes and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol decenter the usual ways that Mexico 1968 is thought of and open the “memory of its temporality” (Draper 2018:157). The torturing of Bernardo, for example, purposely occurs before the scene that presents the raid on his home so that the audience will assume that he is being tortured during the summer of 1968. The presence of computers and other indicators of the 21st century play 1968 forward and force the spectators to acknowledge the continuing apprehension, torture, and disappearance of student activists 50 years later. Likewise, the video made by Lagartijas decenter 1968 by establishing 2048 as the present and focusing on a 2018 film project whose failure reflects that of the current generation to confront and engage critically and actively with the memory of Tlatelolco.

Nonetheless, while both groups oblige the audience to think of 1968 beyond the massacre with which it ended, they offer but a bleak view of the future. Lagartijas’s failure to make the movie is an acknowledgment of their failure to envision a viable future, a task they now entrust to the audience. The aged Paco expresses from the vantage point of 2048 the group’s regret at allowing fear to dictate the cancellation of the movie: “Tuvimos demasiado miedo de equivocarnos” (2018a) (We were too afraid of getting it wrong). Meanwhile, Gabino laments that they will never know what might have been if they had had the courage to continue: “¿Qué sería de nosotros si hubiéramos hecho la película? ¿Las cosas serían distintas? ¿Serían otras nuestras vidas? ¿Sería otro nuestro país?” (2018b:55) (What would have become of us if we had made the movie? Would things be different? Would our lives be different? Would Mexico be a different country?). Auxilio likewise ends with questions, but in this case they belong to the spectator. The musicians play loud, dissonant music, identical Lolitas writh on the floor, and the amulet, once a source of protection, has been figuratively broken into bits. The spectators must ask themselves, what does this fragmented, discordant performance portend for the future? The
answer to this question is not, however, the responsibility of the dramatists, directors, or actors. As Rancière reminds us,

Displacing art’s borders does not mean leaving art, that is making the leap from “fiction” (or “representation”) to reality. Practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses for politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action. They contribute to the constitution of a form of commonsense that is “polemical,” to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable. (2010:149)

In other words, these two performance pieces do not, in themselves, constitute political acts, but rather serve as acts of dissensus, of resistance, reconfiguring Mexico 1968 in a way that makes the act of spectating sensorially and intellectually liberating and at the same time collectively binding. In short, the spectator is not being asked to remember 1968, but rather to act on it and thereby ensure that history does not continue to repeat itself.

Both TeatroSinParedes and Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol are known for their continuous search for formats, spaces, and materials through which to problematize the sociopolitical reality of their country. Gone are the melodrama, nostalgia, and tragic undertones of the Tlatelolco plays of the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s. Rather than rehash the popular slogan “el dos de octubre no se olvida,” these pieces urge their audiences to let go of 1968, focus on their present, and ponder their future. Such reconfigurations of 1968, Draper explains, “write a history of the poetic political gesture that is 1968 from within the very crisis of national imagination that it brought about” and “suffuse the present with the possibility of change” (2018:7). While the short video projected by Lagartijas is not in any shape or form the movie that they tried and failed to make, it and the performance piece itself pursue one of the original and lasting goals of collective creation, which was to convey “the feeling that the world could be changeable and that collective work was the way” (Rizk in Ward 2019:37). These two pieces break from previous works related to 1968 by stressing not only their own theatricality but also the importance of creative expression in general in resisting sameness and inspiring change. The only drawback to such performances is that they are just that, performances. Unlike novels, films, and photos, they themselves are not designed to survive the passage of time. As texts they barely exist, and even as performances they live on only in the memory of the spectator. They are ultimately as ephemeral as the memories they stir and the thoughts they provoke. Hopefully, just as the past lingers in the present, the performances of these two works will linger in the mind of the audience. Indeed, as the title of the second play reminds us, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” These words, borrowed from a short story by William Faulkner, aptly capture the plight of a nation bound to a past that has refused to die. Nonetheless, as these two performances suggest, it is vital that today’s generation of Mexicans, like Benjamin’s Angel of History, turn away from the debris of that past, face forward, and participate collectively in the creation of the future, as unclear and terrifying as that prospect may be.

References


**TDReading**