Art as Refuge: The Symbolic Transformation of an Electronic Installation in the Midst of Chile’s Social Unrest

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Abstract

This position statement describes the transformation of an interactive installation from an instrumental piece of art and science pedagogy into a meaningful performative piece, which forced its creators to adopt a political stance in the light of a period of social unrest taking place in Chile beginning in October 2019. It describes how an apparenently nonpartisan installation transitioned into a tool for political expression and refuge. It also allowed the artists to rethink their role in the community as facilitators of art spaces for self-dialogue.

Pulsante is an electronic art installation representing a large-scale cross-cut model of a human heart (Fig. 1). The installation uses a pulse sensor that captures the visitor’s biodata, directly translating it into light and sound representations of their immediate bodily functions [1]. Pulsante was conceived as a strategy to bring science closer to the audiences of Valdivia, a university town located in the south of Chile. This piece was inspired both by the idea of the heart as a symbol to connect with one’s self and others and by anatomical models used in biological education. By creating this public installation, we wanted to foster a dialogue between art and science in a way that could appear immersive and direct, and therefore relatable for our audience.

The installation emerged as part of a state-funded artistic project and was selected and curated based on its potential impact and relevance for the local community. In this regard, its existence was not necessarily intended to resist an instrumental role as a distributor of scientific pedagogy. We deliberately adapted part of its potential expressiveness to fit the use-value expectations of art and science collaborations. As part of these expectations, the value of art becomes partially determined by how accurately it illustrates and communicates scientific knowledge [2], which in this case relates to how close it resembles the anatomy of the heart. The way Pulsante resisted the primacy of scientific expectations, however, was by offering an open-ended experience of the inner body aimed at escaping from the usual quantified biomedical approach to self-knowledge.

Fig. 1. Pulsante installation, 2019. (© Claudia Núñez-Pacheco)

Asking lack of familiarity with the nature of electronic art installations, we—the artists and authors of this statement—decided to stay on-site and become facilitators of the experience. This facilitated interaction approach [3] allowed us to avoid some potential misuse resulting from leaving an electronic piece unattended, such as a faulty manipulation of the sensor. It also had the advantage of offering a more personalized experience, in this case, by permitting us to exercise more optimally the piece’s pedagogical function: describing the functional attributes of the system and heart. Artists such as George Khut, whose extensive body of work includes digital installations based on the heart and its pulse, use this approach to stimulate reflection in the audience [4]. Pulsante was conceptualized to display a personalized view of someone’s biodata in the context of a public gallery space while being surrounded by witnesses and sharing impressions with them.

The installation was scheduled for a 10-day exhibition at the Casa Luis Oyarzún, a historic house located downtown, concurrent with demonstrations that emerged in the capital city of Santiago on 15 October 2019. As we were unaware of the potential impact of the demonstrations, the launch took place successfully, granting us three days of uninterrupted flow of visitors. By 18 October, mass protests escalated to other cities, including Valdivia. These uprisings emerged as a response to the current socioeconomic system, which situates Chile as an unequal country in terms of income distribution among those belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [5]. The government response to the unrest included military intervention and the imposition of curfews in different cities. For some, we faced a collective déjà vu, with some reminiscences to Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship [6].

As the situation progressed, the protests rapidly altered everyday rituals and the general rhythm of the town, becoming particularly noticeable during the first two months. Service hours, transport routes and shopping habits were deeply influenced by the times of the day when marches escalated. Apart from the daily demonstrations and their sustained presence, communal and self-organized public meetings to discuss the future of Chilean politics started to thrive. For safety reasons, however, cultural events scheduled to take place in public buildings were canceled during the first two weeks of the unrest. Although we were given the option to continue exhibiting our installation, as artists, we faced two perspectives related to the role of art in culture and activism. First, despite the scientific nature of Pulsante, we still visualized art as a powerful platform to represent both our vision and ideological stance [7]. Keeping the exhibition open would symbolize an act of resistance per se, which actively defies the restriction of movement imposed by the authorities. However, it would also be futile to strip the installation of its original meaning due to its nonpartisan link with science and the fact that this project was funded by a well-known state grant from the Chilean Ministry of Culture. Although these funds are dependent on the state and not the government, the association by common sense was inevitable. Far for being interpreted as an act of commitment with the movement, keeping the exhibition open under this context could have been read as a tone-deaf distraction amid a state of unsafety.

Confronted by these two scenarios, we decided to adopt a mixed approach. Officially, the exhibition would remain closed to the public. However, we opted to take a performative role by staying with the artwork during the days the exhibition was programmed. Inspired by performativity as a ritualized...
behavior [8], we agreed on some straightforward rules: First, to set up the exhibition every morning as per usual. Second, to stay in Casa Luis Oyarzún, as if waiting for visitors. And finally, we did not actively attract the audience. Nevertheless, we did publicize the continued exhibition to people who showed interest in what occurred with the installation during the unrest.

Conceputally, Pulsante already contained few performative elements, mainly directed to the audience through facilitation as mentioned above. Our facilitation included fitting the sensor in a specific manner, having a prepared speech explaining the functioning of the heart and answering emerging questions in a welcoming manner. The more explicit performative turn informed by the events, however, transformed our role from facilitators to custodians of the artwork. As in performance, there emerged a dialogical relationship between our life circumstances and the role of our artwork in society, resignifying our actions and the piece’s symbolic value [9]. Our decision to bear with Pulsante during the riots became a way of subverting our lifeworld and its cultural expectations [10], despite the similarity with our routine preceding the social unrest. Given the singularity of the context, our protocolized behavior of remaining there voluntarily shifted the purpose of Pulsante toward symbolizing a much-needed state of certainty. The empty exhibition became a haven of peace amid the chaos occurring outside.

Our few visitors shared with us some compelling insights regarding the role of the installation, unheard of before the political crisis. Responses to the artwork shifted from curiosity about the technicalities of both the system and biology toward becoming a place for daydreaming, similar to a nest, as illustrated by Bachelard in his Poetics of Space [11]. He describes how these places, although inhabitable per se, act as curious sites for refuge and imagination. As they lay on the ground, our visitors allowed themselves to stay in silence while satisfying their cravings for a brief aesthetic moment of self-care. Some participants who actively participated in the protests expressed the importance of keeping the exhibition open for momentary respite from the conflict. Someone explained how being in front of the artwork, in an empty house, evoked a feeling of discovering something that remained a secret, imaginary place. The symbol of communal discovery we initially aimed to facilitate shifted toward becoming an intimate moment of reflection.

The emptiness of the house perceived as the body of the heart appeared as another new symbolic quality. In her analysis “Heartbeats and the Arts,” Claudia Arozqueta describes this process as reterritorializing the pulse’s boundaries [12]. When the pulse sensor reads bodily information and displays it, in this case as light and sound, the artwork somewhat disembodies the pulse for external observation. However, there is a process of reembodiment when the pulse is perceived as belonging to the self. In the case of Pulsante, visitors’ accounts suggested how their embodied connection expanded beyond the body and even the installation, involving the presence of Casa Luis Oyarzún as part of their inner journey.

Although we captured a few informal observations, we suggested that having a utilitarian purpose is not necessarily a problem in artistic representations from a political crisis perspective. Still detached from its original meaning, the installation served both as a space for an escape from our dysfunctional reality and as a mirror of the self [13]. By mirror, we refer to the installation as a dialogical artifact, where visitors could see themselves reflected in the experience. We believe that there are three aspects of Pulsante that helped the audience to project their emotions while putting aside the politicized expectations surrounding everyday living: First, the secrecy of the experience as a deliberate decision. Second, our presence as unconditional listeners and custodians of their secrets. Finally, the embodied nature of the installation, which allowed direct connection with something personal yet commonly invisible to the body and mind’s consciousness.

By illustrating our case, we have provided an example of how the meaning of an artistic piece, even when detached from any political intent, cannot escape from being politicized under the context of social unrest, as reminded by our visitors’ accounts. In a different example, the already political installation Orden y Patria (Order and Fatherland) by Chilean artist Nicolás Grum was awarded an art prize by a private organization before the unrest [14]. His work criticized the excess power exercised by the police. In his acceptance speech during the uprising, Grum expressed his discomfort at receiving an award from high executives connected with the current government and openly highlighted the precarious yet inescapably controversial position of the artist in society.

We are aware that our observations are still quite preliminary. However, our experience suggested the importance of devising artistic formats for nonexplicitly political pieces like Pulsante, able to coexist with social practices of rebellion without being insensitive or distracting from a cause. Motivated by this unexpected outcome, we aim to expand our artistic research by actively rescuing the concepts of spaces as nests and spaces as bodies, to further explore the potential in the generation of art refuges for personalized encounters with the self in the context of social crisis.

References and Notes
4. Loke and Khut [3].
5. Aislinn Laing, Dave Sherwood and Fabian Cambero, “Chile’s inequality challenge: What went wrong and can it be fixed?" Reuters (23 October 2019).
10. Anthony Steinbock, Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl (Evanson, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1995).