



## **Authentic Performance as a Challenge to the State**

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### **Abstract**

Authenticity is a key source of power for social and political protest groups who engage in radical street performance. Publicly performed authenticity circumvents the power of the State (and institutions that are extensions of the State) in its control of public discourse. Such performance serves to create an immediate relationship between protesting groups and the more mainstream public by reducing or collapsing the domain of "critical" distance. This paper examines two specific case studies, Las Madres and Otpor, and analyses the form of street theatre in which they engaged. The connection between a group's *ethos* and their *logos* emerges as an essential element for the success of group protest.

## **Authentic Performance as a Challenge to the State**

In an article entitled "Discussing the Undiscussable," *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce laments, "I do not remember a time when the critic has seemed more expendable than now" (Croce 1995, 60). "Discussing the Undiscussable" is a review of Bill T. Jones' dance piece "Still/Here," a piece Croce refused to attend. In his piece, Jones used actual testimony from people living with terminal illnesses to help create movement for his

dancers. The piece also incorporated videotaped footage of the ill speaking their stories. Croce objected to what she terms "victim art." Her article set off a firestorm in the arts community in early 1995. In brief, Croce makes two significant moves in her article. First, she insists upon the professional critic as the arbiter of "good" art; and second, she further marginalizes the already marginalized by constructing them as a collective of "mere" victims who lack any "individual" and/or "transcendent" genius.

[2] For Croce, the art critic is like the priest who serves as a conduit between man and God. Thus any truncation of "aesthetic distance," or moves on the artist's part that creates immediacy for the spectator, is heresy: a danger to art, or rather, to the art critic's power over art. The art experience, according to Croce (1995), must be mediated by reasoned evaluation; therefore, artists like Jones and Robert Mapplethorpe are seen to "have effectively disarmed criticism" by creating works that seek no "further evaluation" (58). How do they do this? These artists leverage their "status" as "victims" (in these cases "victims" of AIDS): "Instead of compassion, these performers induce, and even invite, a cozy kind of complicity. When a victim artist finds his or her public, a perfect, mutually manipulative union is formed which no critic may put asunder" (Croce 1995, 55). If a "victim" artist can speak "directly" to the sympathies of an audience then the art critic becomes unnecessary, or worse, a heartless and elitist spoilsport, as

many responses to Croce's article painted her.

[3] Croce also dismisses the value of these so-called "victims" as having any potentially forceful artistic voice. Traditionally, the art critic celebrates individual genius and so the collective voice cannot be considered "true" art. Croce (1995) writes: "we have created an art with no power of transcendence, no way of assuring us that the grandeur of the individual spirit is more worth celebrating than the political clout of the group" (59). Artists must be framed "heroically" (to use Kenneth Burke's terminology), and "victims," especially those who actually express their own suffering or shame, are not "heroic." Such people, according to Croce (1995), "represent themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs" (54). For Croce, if her use of the word "but" is any indication, these are mutually exclusive categories: you are either "artist" or "victim." The firestorm of reaction following the publication of Croce's article revealed the highly contentious nature of her premise.

[4] One respondent to Croce was Joyce Carol Oates who wrote in the *New York Times*: "That a human being has been 'victimized' does not reduce his or her humanity, but may in fact amplify it" (Feb 19, 1995). If art is a window into the human condition then the "victim" may very well be the best-qualified artist. Jones seems to feel similarly. When speaking with the

sick and dying in his workshops he asks them “what do *you* know?” (*Bill T. Jones: Still Here* 1997). Jones understands that these “victims” of illness, though technically not “artists,” have a unique and privileged insight into the human condition that should be shared with audiences.

### ***Authenticity and Political Protest***

Of course, Croce is right when she claims that collapsing the aesthetic distance in performance work circumvents the critic. Moreover, critics of both Jones and Croce recognize that marginalized “victims” of society *can* claim privileged and compelling insights into specific aspects of society. Thus, two lessons may be gleaned from the Croce/Jones debate that can help explain the potential power of marginalized group protest in shaping public discourse: 1. “authentic” public performance (rooted as it is in the pre-political, the pre-“rational”) can circumvent the official discourse of the State; and 2. marginalized groups can leverage their very identities as marginalized “others” in order to contribute privileged insights into social and political debates, and to sway public opinion.

[6] In this paper, I will examine two particular cases of group protest. The first, Las Madres del Plaza de Mayo, were a group of Argentine housewives in Buenos Aires during the late 1970s and early 1980s who contributed to the collapse of the military junta that “disappeared” their children. The second,

Otpor, were Serbian youths who (along with previous waves of student protests in the 1990s) helped to bring down the regime of dictator Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. These protesting groups (women, youths) had typically been marginalized in their respective societies making the Croce/Jones debate highly instructive for analyzing their cases. Jones tells the non-dancers in his workshops, "it doesn't have to be virtuosic, just make it true to you" (*Bill T. Jones, 1997*). Jones seems to be seeking "authenticity" here by encouraging these performers to "reveal themselves." I believe that authenticity is also the key source of power for these protest groups. It is authenticity (as opposed to "virtuosity") that condemns critics like Croce to the role of powerless onlooker, while in a similar manner, the "authenticity" of protest circumvents the power of the State (and the institutions that are extensions of the State) in its control of public discourse. Additionally, this publicly performed authenticity reinforces the group's credibility and strengthens voice in the public debate: a voice the State would rather keep marginalized and silenced. I will further explore this vital idea in terms of the "ethos-logos connection" in the conclusion of this paper.

[7] In the cases of Las Madres and Otpor, the protestors take Antonin Artaud's advice: rather than engaging in an "artistic dallying with forms" they are instead "victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames" (Artaud 1958, 13). Groups that claim their marginalized status publicly ("we

*are students,* “*we are housewives,*” etc.) speak directly from a place of privileged insight since only they know what the experience of burning at their own metaphoric stake is like. Such communication is “authentic” and it does not abide by social rules. Lionel Trilling (1972) reminds us that “authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion, aesthetic opinion in the first instance, social and political opinion in the next” (94). Established political institutions, be they a military regime in Argentina, a post-Communist dictatorship in Serbia, or even a Republican presidency in the USA, seek to perpetuate themselves. They fiercely guard against any incursions through the strict maintenance of established rules, the very rules that have put them (and kept them) in power. Such rules may include blindly obeying authority (in a dictatorship), or engaging in “reasonable” deliberation (in a democracy). In either case, authenticity does not suffer such rules. The authentic voice is in distinct contrast to the contrived, institutional and procedural voices of politicians. Moreover, the authentic voice has a different impact on us: it calls upon us to respond authentically ourselves. And it is live public performance, I argue, that is the best vehicle for having the authentic voice of the “other” most effectively heard.

### ***Radical Street Performance***

Both Las Madres and the Serbian student groups engaged in “radical

street performance.” This is a phrase used by Jan Cohen-Cruz (1998) who explains her choice of terms as follows: “By *radical* I refer to acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power. *Street* signals theatrics that take place in public by-ways with minimal constraints on access. *Performance* here indicates expressive behavior intended for public viewing” (1). The live-ness of the event brings performers and spectators together in an immediate communicative relationship. Spectators, whether they choose to do so or not, become participants. In a sense, with the distinction between the observer and the observed eroded, all are of equal status. Live performance is an unmediated encounter between performer and spectator. In radical street performance the aesthetic, or rational distance has been collapsed, and the roles of performer and observer are frequently blurred. According to John Bell (1998), “a parade celebrates the public nature of the entire street, repossessing it (momentarily) from the state and from productive use, redefining it as a performance space and thus celebrating all those participating—paraders and pedestrians, performers and audience” (278). Radical street performance allows for an immediate encounter between performers and audience (blurring those very labels), and through its occupation of the public street it metaphorically subverts the officialdom of the State.

[9] When the street becomes a performance space it becomes

unpredictable. The spectator is in the middle of a live event without protection regardless of whether that event is more akin to a war-zone or a carnival. Creating such a sense of “danger” was the aim of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. For Artaud (1958), the “true theatre” should disturb, not comfort; it should “impose on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic” (28). This is not a process that allows for aesthetic distancing, but is a fully lived experience. The spectator (no longer an adequate word) becomes framed by, or *within*, the experience. Such an effect requires three-dimensional space to contain both performer and audience together, and an unpredictable unfolding of the “now” over time. Live performance is the only art form that offers these conditions. Only performance has the potential to fully implicate the individual in the work, and thus requires an immediate response. *How* one answers is up to the individual, but they must answer. They do not make demands on the situation; it makes demands on them.

[10] A subsidiary effect of radical street theatre is the democratization of the theatre itself. Non-performers become the performers in a move not dissimilar from Bill T. Jones’ use of non-dancers to help choreograph “Still/Here.” Jones’ work celebrated “pedestrian” movement as authentic. Jones instructed his workshop participants to “just make it “true to you,” so by extension, if performance is simply about being “you,” then anyone can

do it. Jerzy Grotowski (1997) suggests a similar move towards such “democratization” of performance when he writes that the authentic “unveiling” that he strives for with his actors (or rather “non” actors) cannot be found “by means of training” (225). In theory, the ability to reveal one’s authentic self is available to everyone regardless of professional experience. Neither the Argentine housewives who comprised Las Madres nor the young student members of Otpor were actors or “trained” performers; they were merely “themselves.” And this was the very source of their effectiveness.

[11] Let me now examine the two case studies in a bit more detail.

### ***Performing Motherhood***

In April of 1977, after a year of government sponsored terror in Argentina, several mothers of disappeared children, frustrated with trying to find out any information about their loved ones, decided to take their questions the seat of power: the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. A small group of these women met in the Plaza outside of the President’s Palace. Government officials told them to go home. In spite of the dismissal, the women continued to gather in the Plaza de Mayo every week trying to seek information. The numbers of these women soon grew, and they eventually came to be called “Las Madres (that is, The Mothers) de Plaza de Mayo.”

Protesting in silence at first, Las Madres eventually became more vocal,

asking the question outright: "Where are our children?" The military junta, who would brook no political dissent, had a difficult time handling Las Madres. As mothers in Argentine society these older and matronly women "were implicitly excluded from the different groups defined as 'subversive'" (Navarro 2001, 257), and so were not subject to arrest by the government.

[13] Francesca Miller, who has studied feminist movements among Latin American women, notes that "rather than reject their socially defined role, Latin American feminists may be understood as women acting to protest laws and conditions which threaten their ability to fulfill that role" (quoted in Fabj 1993, 6). Las Madres were no exception. They were mothers first and foremost with no interest in altering "the politics of the home, for example, the gendered division of labor" (Taylor 1997, 192). However, with their children disappeared the mothers could no longer remain in their homes and continue to be mothers; they were compelled to take to the streets.

[14] Las Madres presented themselves as the true guardians of the Argentine home and family. They intentionally "dressed down as dowdy old women" (Taylor 1997, 198); their age and gender rendered them simultaneously harmless and authoritative. These women, "just" housewives and mothers, were powerless when compared with the virile strength of the military officers. How could an elderly woman wearing her bedroom slippers

compete with an officer in full military attire? At the same time, these women embodied the role of “keepers of the Argentine home”—even when they were outside of the home. They were the guardians of the nation’s children: the mothers who sacrificed all for their young and, therefore, a significant force to be reckoned with.

[15] Argentine cultural values aided Las Madres in their self-presentation. The traditional view of women was rooted in “the cult of *marianismo*” which “complements the cult of *machismo* in Argentina” (Bouvard 1994, 184). Las Madres certainly fit the description of self-sacrificing and suffering mothers, and more importantly they embodied this image in their public “performances.” The mothers marched with serious faces, eyes looking upward, heads covered: the epitome of supplicating and suffering women (Taylor 1997, 196). Once their marches grew in size and the mothers themselves became more vocal, they used their suffering and cries to evoke Mary, the archetypal mother: “The Madres’ wounds were their instruments. By exposing themselves ... they sought to expose the violent politics the military tried to cover up” (Taylor 1997, 198). The junta attempted to label the mothers as “emotional terrorists” (Taylor 1997, 80), but the mothers’ methods of public grieving were in keeping with what “*marianismo*” permitted.

[16] During their marches in the Plaza de Mayo, Las Madres carried pictures of their children either around their necks or on hand-held posters. These pictures literally put a human face on the missing. The Mothers published poetry and books that contained photographs of their children (Bouvard 1994, 244). Las Madres “crashed” a 1981 celebration in the city of La Plata, and unfolded a large banner displaying their children’s names and the question: WHERE ARE THE DISAPPEARED?” (Bouvard 1994, 110). By naming and picturing the disappeared the mothers not only re-humanized the missing children (in contrast to the junta’s attempts to dehumanize the so-called subversives), but also reinforced their own collective identity as “mothers,” giving them authenticity and authority in the public eye.

### ***Just Kids***

If Las Madres were authentically performing the role of “mother,” the student protestors of Otpor (“resistance”) were playing the role of “kids.” Three separate waves of Serbian student street protests, centered primarily in Belgrade, arose in 1992, 1996-1997 and 1999-2000. A student group called Otpor led this last series of protests, which eventually gained them international renown. All of these student protests had two things in common: they targeted dictator Slobodan Milosevic and his policies, and they employed humorous and irreverent non-violent actions to make their points. According to Otpor member Sveta Matic, “We’re a generation that

likes to play jokes, to laugh all the time, and that is our secret weapon” (Rubin 2000). During the nine years from 1992 to 2000 (when Milosevic was finally ousted from power), Serbian youth took to the streets in a series of theatrical events satirizing Milosevic and his cohorts.

[18] The students’ irreverent and comic actions were actually very savvy acts of protest. Such actions served to reinforce their collective “ethos,” which in turn made the students’ rhetorical actions all the more persuasive while at the same time protecting them from charges of “terrorism” lodged by the State. For example, one day in 1996, Serbian student protestors covered the Electoral Commission building in Belgrade with toilet paper in the middle of the night (Ackerman and Duvall 2000, 478). What could be a more quintessentially childish prank? Consequently, the attempt by Milosevic’s state propaganda apparatus to portray the student protestors as dangerous neo-fascists and terrorists failed. According to Serbian commentator Ivan Marovic, “[local people saw] that these kids are like 18 to 20 years of age ... C’mon. This is ridiculous, these kids are not fascists. These kids are just kids” (*Bringing Down a Dictator* 2002). This was precisely the trump card that Otpor and the earlier waves of student protestors played: we are “just kids.” This self-positioning allowed them to get away with public acts aimed at undermining the power of Milosevic and his regime.

[19] Indeed the protestors were “just kids” in terms of chronological age. Observers of the ‘96-’97 student protestors reported that “most of them [were] no older than twenty” (Collin 2001, 101). According to Otpor activist Stanko Lazendic, when the group first formed in October 1998 the majority of its members were “boys and girls 18 and 19 years old” (Ackerman and Duvall 2000, 485). Rather than apologizing for their youth the students, embraced it—much as Las Madres embraced their own social roles as Mothers. When State officials characterized the student uprisings as having been organized by outside pro-fascist groups bent on “manipulating children,” student protestors seized upon this remark as a platform; they owned and satirized it simultaneously by holding signs that read “I have an under-aged, retarded, impressionable, seduced, manipulated, pro-fascist temperament” (Collin 2001, 111). The students were determined to keep their identity “pure,” and successfully undermined any attempts at re-categorization as anything other than “just kids.”

[20] Through their street actions, the student protestors reveled in, and continually re-proclaimed their status as young people and students. In 1992, for example, student protestors staged the “Prisoners of Shortsightedness” action in response to charges by the State that previous protests “must have been organized by someone else” and not by the students themselves: “The students pinned prisoners’ numbers onto their

shirts and walked with one hand holding their student identification cards high in the air, the other covering their eyes" (Knezevic 1998, 55). Such an action worked effectively on several different levels. One, the action directly defined the protestors as young people which they verified by holding their student cards. Two, the logos of the action—the specific "arguments" chosen (its creative theatricality and commentary on the status of students as prisoners of an older establishment)—served to reinforce their youthfulness. Three, the action undermined the official state position on the protests by taking the very words of the officials and satirizing them. As with Las Madres, the Serbian student protestors simply "played" at being themselves, and such authentic performance gave them credibility in the eyes of the Serbian populace.

***Making Connections with the "Other" and the Problem of Instrumentality***

As protestors from marginalized segments of society, Las Madres and the Serbian students had to win over the mainstream elements of their societies in order to create social and political change. Part of the purpose of public protest, then, is to establish a connection with the public in general, and create changes in the public's attitudes and perspectives.

[22] A response from the public arises when they feel some sort of

connection with the protestors; street theatre allows for an immediacy of experience that truncates objectivity. Martin Buber (1965) notes how we ordinarily respond to another human being as “object” (10-11). On rare occasions, however, we may “become aware” of the other person, and for Buber this is a very different situation: the encounter “speaks something that enters my own life” (Buber 1958, 11). Buber uses the term “I-Thou” to refer to such an encounter: “The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation” (Buber 1958, 6). Unlike the “I-It” perspective, when others are objects for our use (even if for benevolent reasons), the “I-Thou” puts us in immediate and authentic (“living”) relationship with the “other,” causing a shift on some profound level within ourselves. If the spectator at a live performance is truly “present,” they cannot help but “lose” themselves in the encounter. Hans Georg Gadamer (2004) asserts that the spectator does not remain “aloof” due to some critical or “aesthetic consciousness [of] enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present” (128). Buber’s I-Thou creates a similar experience of the self-dissolving in the moment, as the perceiver (Buber) or spectator (Gadamer) enters into a “communion” with the other within the performance space.

[23] For such pure communion experiences to occur the performer (no longer an adequate word) must “reveal” himself to the spectator (again, no

longer an adequate word). The performance must be authentic. Richard Schechner (1997) writes that Grotowski's work from his "para-theatrical" period aimed "to dissolve the masks of imposture most people wear as their ordinary social selves and, in a spiritually vulnerable mode, to communicate directly face-to-face" (211). Grotowski (1997) equates the process of "revealing oneself" with "giving testimony" (223). When Las Madres mourn for their disappeared children outside the Casa Rosada, or when a Serbian student declares in the street, "Dad, do I have to get killed to make you come to your senses?" (Prosic-Dvornic 1993), they are drawing the public into an immediate "I-Thou" encounter by giving personal and authentic "testimony."

[24] Yet significant problems emerge here around "instrumentality." Can authenticity be intentionally used as a strategy? Can public performance ever be truly "authentic"? Can the spontaneous nature of an authentic *I-Thou* encounter really be controlled for a purpose? According to Trilling (1972), "if sincerity has lost its former status ... that is because it does not propose being true to one's own self as an end but only as a means" (9). Indeed, authenticity is suspect if it is seen as a strategic, or conscious "act" in order to get something, rather than an honest expression of self.

[25] The authentic encounter between performer and spectator is

impossible when conscious manipulation enters the picture. Gadamer (2004) notes that the “field of play” needs to be set apart and sealed off from “the world of aims” (107) in order that the real living encounter with “art” or “other” may be experienced. Buber (1958) writes that “every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about” (12). The authentic encounter is, in effect, a “spiritual” experience, and as such, cannot be “useful” in the sense of a commodity. How then can protest groups harness authenticity, performance, and *I-Thou* connections in ways that can still effectively get their “message” out into the public?

### ***Conclusion: the Ethos-Logos Connection***

Rhetorical theory might be able to help us resolve these tensions, at least in the way they work for protest groups on the margins of society. For authenticity to remain intact the public methods employed by the protestors need to be ones that are in keeping with their collective “ethos.” For example, of course mothers would mourn the loss of their children; that this act is witnessed in public and creates a response does not detract from its authenticity. Similarly, Serbian youth playing pranks is simply part of who they are and what they do—it is “authentic.” That these pranks are at Milosevic’s expense does not undermine the group’s credibility.

[27] In his book *Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character*, Eugene Garver

(1994) argues that the character of the speaker (*ethos*), and the means of persuasion used (*logos*) are inextricably linked: "In rhetoric and practical judgment *ethos* is necessary for finding and formulating arguments, and not just presenting them" (191). There must be a deliberate consistency between *ethos* and *logos*; given Otpor's self-stated character as "just kids," what type of arguments/actions would they use if not "pranks"? Their humorous street antics were authentic and non-instrumental acts of "being" (*ethos*). That these same pranks undermined the authority of the State (the instrumental "argument," the *logos*) was a seemingly "secondary" effect. Similarly, Las Madres "argued" by pleading for information concerning the whereabouts of their children. Such "arguments" were the unforced outgrowth of the mothers' *ethos*, and still they also implicated the military junta in a devious cover-up.

[28] Kenneth Burke's concept of "impiety" is useful in explaining how authenticity functions rhetorically, and thus instrumentally. When Las Madres take to the streets to mourn their children they are acting "authentically" (mothers truly mourn for missing children) but "impiously" (Argentine women do not make public spectacles of themselves, and in fact, should not even leave the home). By violating certain social codes in order to obey other "pre-political" codes Las Madres are acting "impiously pious." Their actions flout the authority of the State and Argentina's tradition of a

male-dominated public sphere and are, in this way, "impious." However, if we accept Burke's definition of piety (after Santayana) as "loyalty to the sources of our being" (Burke 1994, 71) these women's actions are just the opposite of impious. The protestors of Otpor also act "impiously" by violating social taboos, while at the same time acting "piously" according to the rules of their own collective (namely "Serbian youth" in the 1990s) when they stage a mock birthday party for Slobodan Milosevic on the streets of downtown Belgrade. Their ironic and outrageous choice of "logos" is an authentic expression of the group's "ethos." These two forms of rhetorical proof serve to substantiate one another: the pious ethos serving as a cover (of sorts) for the impious logos.

[29] In this way, marginalized groups are able to leverage their very identities as marginalized "others" on the street in order to help shape public discourse. Confronted by disruptive impious performances in the street, the public is startled into a changed perspective; something new has happened. But some element of "known-ness," arising from the pious or authentic ethos of the protest group itself, allows for the public to "recognize" these people as credible. Indeed, such recognition is the glue that holds the social center together as our collective horizons expand forever outward, and the range of what a society finds "discussable" continues to grow beyond the censure of critics and the State.

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