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MEMORIES IN TIME OF CRISIS

The City as Text
A Kilometric Scroll through the Memory of the Uprising in Chile, 2019

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Abstract
This article presents *The City as Text's* project – a virtual memory archive from the social uprising in Chile 2019 – that responds to the urgency of preserving the memory engraved on the walls faced with the threat of being literally whitewashed.
A record over a single day, through the main street in the capital city where demonstrations took place, a few days before the government censored the messages written there. Through a hybrid process: an experiential walk complemented by a virtual work allowed the creation of a new kind of memory archive. An interface that invites people all over the world to revisit memory through the streets of Santiago.
At the same time, the work explores topics related to the ephemeral nature of public space; the polyphony of protests; the importance of design/technology allowing interfaces that can help people to experience, understand and study political processes, even if they are miles away. The web platform could not be translated just into data. When those codes – guided by design – invite people to take a virtual walk, the information becomes an experience. In this context, the prevailing need to record, share and make it accessible becomes a question of design.
The project also dignifies the role of design by documenting heritage in new formats.
The City as Text – as an alternative historical archive – is also an invitation to build a more conscious, connected, inclusive, and respectful future.

Figure 1. Photograph from the main avenue where demonstrations took place in Santiago, during October 2019. This picture was taken on the 23rd November, a month after the protests began. Source: ©La Ciudad como Texto, 2019.

Art can use a powerful, albeit controversial, weapon: Beauty. (Mouffe, 2017, p. 34)

The correspondence between politics and beauty reveals unusual modes of social transformation, mobilising ideas, provoking the regeneration of forms of resistance and giving protagonism to performativity in the political manifestations. (Ulibarri, 2017, p. 7)

1. Becoming Present through the Walls of Santiago

In his book *The End of the cognitive empire,* Boaventura de Sousa Santos says that "the sociology of absences is the cartography of the abyssal line.

It identifies the ways and means through which the abyssal line produces nonexistence, radical invisibility, and irrelevance" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 25).

The present text argues that the multiple protests that have taken place around the world, and in particular the crisis in Chile in October 2019, constitute a fight against the urban *abyss* and *radical invisibility* in our cities. During the months of protests, Santiago's public space becomes a platform for marches, performances, self-convoked councils, barricades, new forms of informal commerce, trenches, educational instances, dancing, protest, violence, and political resistance, among other forms of expression. For a while, citizens took over the streets to express their disagreements and desires. The abyssal zone that divided the city between *the haves and have-nots* became a space of consequent cultural dispute.

2. The Initial Explosion: 18th October 2019

On October 18th, 2019, Chile experienced what was referred to as the "Social Uprising", one of the biggest political crises in its history. As Gastón Soublette, an outstanding Chilean philosopher calls it: "A megacrisis". It was an explosion of demands stemming from discontent that had dragged on after years of violations of citizens' rights, triggered by a 30-pesos (€ ~0,033) increase in the price of metro fares in the capital city. The most transversal slogan was the concept of "dignity", which means the struggle to achieve a dignified life for all Chileans where basic rights or services such as education, housing, health, and pensions would be guaranteed for all without distinction.

Figure 2. The image shows Plaza de la Dignidad (the heart of all protests in the capital) on 25th October 2019, the day when the most iconic protest of the social outbreak took place; more than 1.2 million people marched in Santiago and 3 million people across Chile left their homes to demonstrate peacefully. Source: ©Jorge Aguayo, 2019.

The high concentration of wealth and opportunities exclusively in privileged groups, adding to the corruption of the political class, indicates another situation in the country: the inequality that marks the daily life of its inhabitants. In October 2019, this situation was no longer sustainable, and citizens began to demand urgent and profound structural reforms in the pension, education and health systems in addition to hundreds of other demands, for example: the right to water after years of privatization of this natural resource in the country; the respect and consideration for the indigenous peoples; to try femicide cases within the justice system; and the failure to sign certain free trade and pharmaceutical agreements, to name but a few. A few days after the demonstrations began, the promises of almost thirty years made by the democratic government after the military dictatorship were seen as broken, and the "normality" that Chileans had come to live with, day after day, would no longer be accepted (Ureta Marín, 2021, p. 13). In this scenario, no person, institution, discipline, or corner of the country was isolated from the debate.

During demonstrations, the centre of Santiago became the receptacle of all kinds of graphic expressions against the aggravating abyssal exclusions of a society deeply rooted in the appropriation of human and natural resources (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 24). Day after day, citizens wrote demands on the walls of the streets, which became a kind of 'graphic skin' of a country in crisis. Kilometres of graffities, texts, drawings, acronyms, dates, and icons took over the visual landscape of the streets in the form of the citizen textuality necessary to capture, interpret and incorporate into the repertoire of fu-

ture memories of this ephemeral present. With this need in mind, the designer Carola Ureta Marín created the project *The City as Text*, which sought to respond through design to the challenges of safeguarding these graphic interventions from the centre of the Chilean revolt in order to transform them into accessible material for consultation that would generate future analyses and studies.

The public space, understood in general terms as a place of meeting and transit, is inherently circumscribed by its ephemeral quality. This short-term condition responds to constant movement and changes that the city experiences minute by minute. Its variability depends on multiple factors such as vehicular traffic, pedestrian circulation, cyclists, dogs, pigeons, and weather variation, which modifies the streets' visuality. It is not only about movement but also the stillness of certain elements that make the city alter its continuous flow.
The protests in Chile in October modified the usual flow of the streets. Due to the mobilization, public space responded to that disturbance and shifted its traditional configuration. This phenomenon could be considered symptomatic of a society in a state of mutation, not to say "decomposition" (Careri, 2002, p. 19). The appropriation of public space implies changing the street's usual patterns; this appropriation did not respond to cognitive or strategic thinking.
On the contrary, as Sousa Santos explains, "The context of the struggle – the specific aims and social groups involved – provides noncognitive dimensions that condition how absent social groups and knowledge become present" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 27).

Figure 3. Image of a traditional bus stop on the main avenue of the protest in Santiago, 23rd November, 2019. Source: ©La Ciudad como Texto, 2019.

The walls read like the collective story of the Chilean social abyss that accompanies the daily life of citizens; it is not a coherent political manifesto, but neither urban noise, as many would like to believe.

Graffiti can be important in understanding local conflicts, their dynamics, and the imaginaries that arise from social movements (Vogel et al., 2020). Beyond a criminological approach or an anthropological study of graffiti, recent literature takes graffiti as "an alternative, and dynamic commentary on everyday life in conflict-affected societies is thus an innovative way to tackle this knowledge gap and gain insights

into political, social and economic issues" (Vogel et al., 2020). The graffiti of the Chilean uprising constitutes a unique graphic language that reflects the local imaginary of this singular historical period. The walls represent the medium or canvas for a particular type of citizen writing proposed in this article. The script expands organically to bus stops, signs, pavements, fences, benches and even the ground.

This citizen textuality has the quality of being anonymous, collective, and popular, a writing that is an experience partially closed to traditional epistemological enquiries. In this sense, as researcher and designer Nicole Cristi points out, it dissolves individual boundaries to build a unique, polyphonic, and powerful identity, situated and overflowing in materiality and immateriality (Ureta Marín, 2020, p. 20).

3. Journeys through Urban and Textual Networks

The media historian Friedrich A. Kittler in his essay *The City is a Medium* points out that "what strikes the eye of the passerby as growth or entropy is technology, that is, information. Since cities no longer lie within the panopticon of the cathedral or castle and no longer enclosed by walls or fortifications, a network made up of intersecting networks dissects and connects the city – in particular its fringes, peripheries, and tangents" (Kittler, 2017, p. 138). The network of graffiti overlapped with the city nodes where multiple urban space networks were connected. The point of maximum intensity of graffiti occurred at the critical intersections where the most important networks of the city coupled, paradoxically the place where technologies of the city converge was – simultaneously – the social limit for most habitants of Santiago.

After October, the traces of graffiti on the capital's main avenue became the visual testimony of the point at which the paths of thousands of people who had taken the metro to work a day earlier became a new network of symbols that emerged to rewrite our understanding of the city.

Following this thinking, Francesco Careri states that "the territory is a medium through which one can read and write as a text" (Careri, 2002, p. 137). But how can we access this medium? How can we read the intensities that emerge in the city? Walking is conceived as a means of knowledge by the *Dada* and their *Surrealist Deambulations*. They state that "deambulation is a medium through which to enter into contact with the unconscious part of the territory" (Debord, 2007, p. 79). On the walls of Santiago, the writings are naturally erasing previous texts as messages are placed one on top of another. After the most intense civic appropriation of the streets, it was common to see people walking just to contemplate the effects of the social movement over a city that used to be familiar but is not anymore. Urban Deambulation became a form of reading the ephemeral – but historical – moment.

The concept of citizen writing implies changing the paradigm of looking at protests and public events as ephemeral experiences that only have a place in a moment and are forced into a regime of invisibility. Italo Calvino refers, in the book *Invisible Cities*, to the fact that "The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the

poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls" (Calvino, 1997, p. 9). Cities contain their memories and daily lives, which are supposed to be routine, but something that happens every day in the street is never exactly the same. Similarly, "Human beings generate lines wherever they go", leaving traces by walking, understanding that a trace "is any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement" (Ingold, 2016, p. 44).

How can we deal with these traces? How can we propose a memory artefact for these traces? Following the idea of Sousa Santos of an epistemology of the South, "whether an individual or a collective being besides dealing with other ways of knowing, does so while involved in a social and political struggle that precisely matters for not being a mere intellectual competition with one-self (self-reflexivity) or with others (academic rivalry among schools of thought)" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 28). Graffiti becomes another way of knowing while, at the same time, it is a form of civic textuality that creates a liberated zone of meaning, where reading and writing walk around, and cognitive comprehension yields an experience of varying intensities.

4. The City as Text: a Manual and Digital Process

A few days before the government whitewashed the walls, a pair of Chilean artists, a designer and a photographer made an extensive record. Two point four kilometres of continuous façade of the Alameda (the main street where protests took place in the capital city) were captured on photographic film. The registration was carried out on 23rd November 2019 by

means of a walk through the central line of the avenue. During this period, the streets were closed due to relentless blockades by police forces, the smouldering remains of barricades and constant clouds of tear gas. How can we read and hear what the city walls are shouting when everything is in constant movement, change and vibration?

It was the above question that gave life to this alternative digital archive. Being able to stop and look at what was happening in the streets was impossible at the time due to the constant threat of police and systematic violation of human rights.

Figure 4. Technical record of the 2.4 km of the main avenue in Santiago. It specifies the streets registered, the kilometres documented, the equipment used, etc. Source: ©La Ciudad como Texto, 2020.

The urgency of protecting these messages forced the director of *The City as Text* project to conduct a study prior to the recording process to protect her and the photographer's safety. To do this, she established a technical sheet that included the exact route to be taken, the name of the streets, the kilometres recorded, the time it was to occur, and the camera and lens required, then also added the total number of photographs captured.

The recording officially began at 07:10 am (Fig. 4), and the capture of the first photograph was considered the starting point. The tour lasted around three hours, with the last image captured at 10:18 am, directly in front of the government palace. Around two hundred photographs were taken during the tour, documenting the south side of the Alameda as a summary of the social demands waiting to be heard on the north side, that is, by the government palace (Fig. 5).

The editing process of the recorded material took a few weeks, and the only treatment carried out was colour adjustment and reframing of some of the images. After digital processing by the photographer, all the images were printed in a 4x6-inch format. Finally, after an analogue montage process, more than a hundred images reconstructed the entire route. Ten 1.20 metres long pieces were created, translating into twelve metres of a continuous canvas representing the full-scale 2.4 kilometres. The work was carried out in Santiago de Chile in February and March 2020 (Fig. 6).
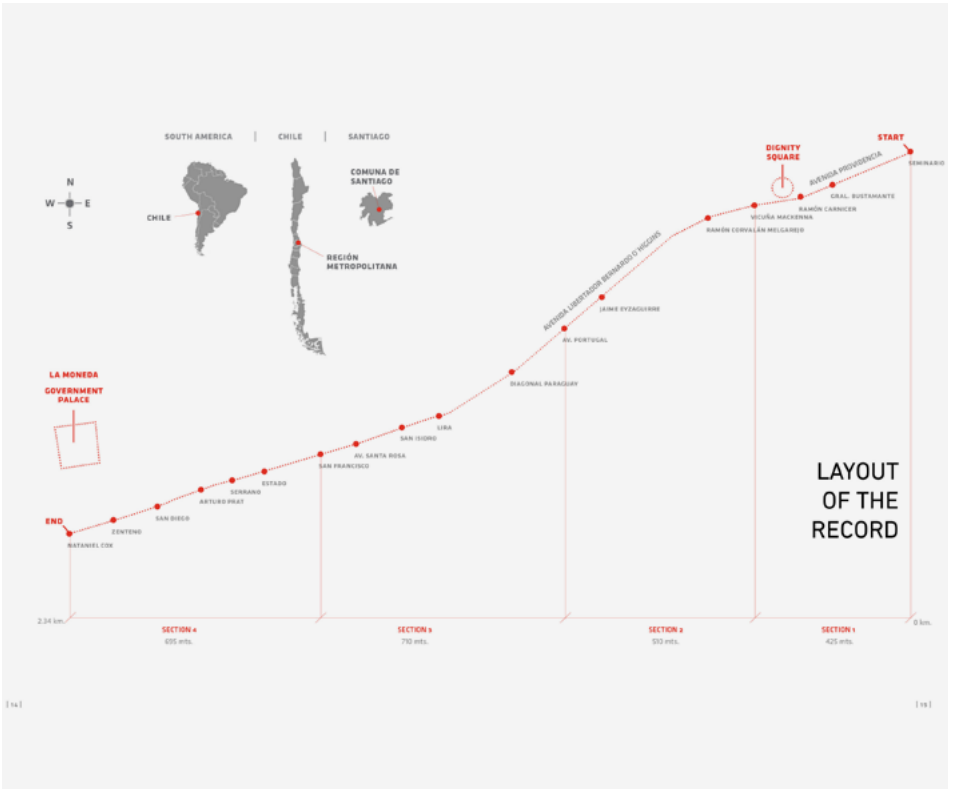
Figure 5. Schematic plan showing the documentation layout produced by the designer Carola Ureta Marín and the photographer Daniel Corvillón. Source: ©Carola Ureta Marín, 2020.

Figure 6. Manual route reconstruction process by superimposing 136 photographs to recreate 2.4 kilometres of Santiago's main avenue. Source: ©Carola Ureta Marín, 2020.

It is completely natural and common for city walls to be written on and for the messages themselves to erase the previous ones by overwriting or simply by the passage of time. What happened at this particular moment in Chile's history? We will call it censorship for the following reasons. This action carried out by the government in charge has two characteristics that distance it from the possibility of being called a palimpsest. These are the variables of time and planning. The palimpsest is produced by the natural passage of time, where texts are written on top of each other without premeditation, and for this reason, the old ones are erased by the appearance of new ones. What the government did less than 20 days after the protests began was a premeditated plan of erasure and executed on a specific night in the streets. Because of this, it qualifies as censorship.

Continuing with the explanation of the process, once the physical assembly of the route was finished, the digital work began by using the physical prototype as a framework. Different interfaces were developed in creating the web platform for hosting this huge archive: www.laciudadcomotexto.cl.
In essence, the website is an invitation to take a virtual tour of the 2.4 km recorded on the 36th day of the protests. A journey that begins at the epicentre of the citizen protests and proceeds along the southern side of the emblematic central axis of the city, ending across the street from the government palace. In this way, people from all over the world can live the experience of walking through those streets and imprint the memory of a particular moment in Chilean history. This material is free and open access and is presented as an input for various research and educational, artistic, and cultural works.

Using the hashtag #lamemorianoseborra (memory cannot be erased), *The City as Text* protects this memory, crystallizing a moment of the social outbreak. At a time of profound social, political, cultural, and even environmental changes, revisiting and remembering what has already happened can contribute to a better future and shed light on drafting a New Constitution.

This apparent new understanding of writing history by conceiving the city as a "medium" is not so different from the first books in history, the oral texts. *The City as Text* collects the oral expressions shouted in the streets and fixes them on the walls as if they were pages. Compared to conventional books, it changes its materiality. Instead of paper, it mainly uses concrete, and instead of ink, it is written with paint, posters, stencils, and chalk.

Figure 7. Digital process to create the web platform that allows people to take a virtual walk, through a long scroll. Source: ©Carola Ureta Marín, 2020.

This requires thinking about new materialities to write history, and it is precisely by imagining new possibilities that this work started to represent a new type of memory archive, perhaps. During the particular moment of the pandemic, when many countries of the world were in lockdown due to Covid-19, digital became essential. This online archive, therefore, not only documents history but also democratises access to information and, at the same time,
can be seen as a way to roam the outside world despite the lockdown.

5. The Attempt to Erase the Present and Its Future Memory

After a month of continuous protests, the walls of Santiago's main street were filled with different messages written by citizens to express their wishes. Among the government's repressive measures was erasing them all without having managed to fulfil the citizens' demands, needs and desires. The process of whitewashing the walls was easily carried out at night due to the curfew imposed in the capital city before the pandemic made this restrictive measure natural. The imperative need to protect this historical memory before its censorship led to this photographic record. The phrases, labels, characters, graffiti, news, stencils, names, faces and illustrations on the walls serve as an alternative source of information to the official history expressed in the record and narrative of the press or academic articles, as citizens constantly construct it in the public space. The violation of citizens' rights – and even human rights – in this particular historical moment in Chile makes it ethically necessary to make this conflict visible, to record and document it (Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Act of censorship carried out by the government of President Sebastián Piñera, just three weeks after the protests began in Chile. Source: ©The City as Text, 2019.

A topic that it is essential to address is that the centre of Santiago during the mobilizations was highly mediatized.

The enormous number of people participating periodically and sharing their experiences on social media urges a digital ethnography of the moment. Following the ideas of Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, we live in a deeply mediatized context, and therefore innumerable amounts of data were produced during the hectic days of October 2018. Some of this work of processing image data has been addressed by the group Forensic Architecture, specifically using live footage to manage the use of tear gas against citizens protesting (*Tear Gas in Plaza De La Dignidad*, 2019). This is a critical dimension in conceptualising the city as media (Kittler, 2017). There is a pending research agenda on the interdependence between graffiti interventions and the awareness of the future digital mediatization of these interventions.

6. Final Words

The project *The City as Text* tries to problematize the cartography of the abyssal line (de Sousa Santos, 2018), which became impossible to ignore after the October Social Uprising in Chile 2019. That line was expressed through the graffiti and graphic intervention in the city's centre and was under constant threat of being erased by the government. The reconstruction of the experience of walking the streets of Santiago in those hectic days is an impossible task. The project intended to explore the critical elements for the future readability of the intervened streets.

To achieve this goal, a new visual grammatic of memory in the digital age was researched and implemented.

The temporal flow of the horizontal scroll and the overlapping images in the project website are just a few examples of the grammatic of digital archiving for public memory and study.

Today the streets in Santiago are very different; activism and protests continue, but the dense visual language that characterised the uprising is long gone. However, the messages continue to resonate like an echo of social demands, even when they can no longer be seen. The ephemeral and vibrant memory of public space finds its fixation through the design of this interface and web platform, turning that past moment into a long-term memory.

Figure 9. The second printed edition of *The City as Text* documents two years of social protest. It includes more than fifty contributions that open up a dialogue on the social crisis from multiple disciplines. Source: ©Andrés Larraín, 2020.

Along with the website, books, prints and other instruments of readability that form part of *The City as Text* projects, we hope new initiatives emerge and test the limits of the visual grammatic proposed. Only time will tell the project's usefulness in deepening the aesthetic and political understanding of these citizens writing during this relevant period of recent Chilean history (Fig. 9).

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IV

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Her research can be generally described as Speculative Design, through which she strives to understand how people and technology (will) interact with each other.
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Since 2018 he is a Research Fellow at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Faculty of Design and Art.
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His design research projects, presented in many academic conferences and events such as TEDx and Visualized.io received the Data Journalism Award 2015, the European Design Award 2016 and 2017.

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Her research topics and publications concern visual identity and communication design applied to public context such as Museums, territories, and cultural heritage, with a particular attention on the public utility and impact.
She is co-founder of Studio Taller, a graphic and communication design studio based in Rimini. Since 2018 she has been collaborating as a volunteer and professional consultant for "Il Palloncino Rosso", a social promotion association with which she works on projects for social innovation and cultural promotion, creating exhibitions of regional interest, publications and participatory projects related to the conscious reuse of abandoned buildings.
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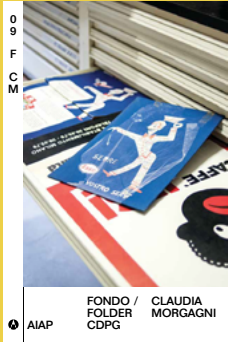michele.zannoni@unibo.it

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